

“WE ARE THE LORD’S”
Romans 14:1-12
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
September 13, 2020

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is contained in today’s Epistle lesson from Romans. I’ve used it many times in funeral sermons. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:7-8).

Paul is reminding his readers that, as mortals, all of us live on the boundary between life and death. The apostle himself teeters on that boundary with every breath he takes. Not only is he aging in natural ways, but his life is constantly threatened by persecution and physical suffering. On any given day, he could live or he could die. But Paul tells us he is content, almost nonchalant, about being in such a precarious position. Both destinies – life and death – are attractive to him: part of him wants to go on living so he can continue his mission as an apostle of Christ; part of him would gladly embrace dying so he can be united with the risen Christ. Because of his confidence in God, Paul declares that he can have it either way.

I’ve officiated at the funerals of many individuals who had this same perspective. They may have “fought the good fight” to live as long as possible; but in the end, they viewed their death not as a defeat but as a victory. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner once described such persons as “grave-merry.” It’s not that they were happy about the prospect of dying; rather, it’s that, in Jesus Christ, death has lost its sting, and they could face death with a sense of gratitude, peace, and even joy. They knew they belonged to God in this life and would still belong to God in the life to come. Paul speaks for them and for all Christians when he says, “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

I still believe this is a great text for a funeral sermon. However, when I encountered this passage again in today’s Epistle lesson, I made a surprising discovery. For many years, I’ve been using this text at funerals without understanding its original context. Here in Romans 14, Paul is not reflecting on his death or the death of fellow Christians; he is reflecting on the life Christians still share together as the Church. And he is honest enough to acknowledge that our life together is often marked by disagreement and conflict.

I preached last Sunday from the Gospel lesson in Matthew, where Jesus speaks of a particular kind of conflict in the Church – a situation in which one member does something that is morally offensive to another member. Perhaps the offending party commits slander against an innocent party, or misuses money that belongs to the whole community, or has an inappropriate relationship with another church member. Jesus insists that such wrongdoing must be named and directly confronted. When someone’s bad behavior causes harm to another individual or disrupts the faith community as a whole, church folks cannot simply look the other way. No, Jesus says that judgment must be rendered and the offending party must be held accountable, with the ultimate goal of restoring the offender to full fellowship.

In today’s lesson from Romans 14, Paul points to another kind of conflict within the church. The scenario in this instance is not a moral transgression about which there can be little debate.

Some words and actions are clearly wrong; they are contrary to the will of God and violate community standards, and they must be dealt with decisively. However, Paul has his sights set here not on moral transgressions, but on everyday religious practices – practices which create differences of opinion and also lead to conflict in the church. In these instances, Paul says, it may not be the case that one party is clearly right and the other party is clearly wrong; rather, the issue at hand is subject to varying interpretations, each of which has some validity. Therefore, church members in one camp cannot claim to have an absolute corner on the truth and dismiss those in other camps as being heretics. When faithful Christians disagree on these kinds of issues, they are not to judge others; they are to accept others. Such a response doesn't contradict the counsel of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel; it just speaks to a different kind of situation.

Apparently, there is disagreement within the church at Rome, not about the basics of Christian belief and behavior, but about appropriate ways of being religious. In part, these differences reflect the variety of backgrounds his readers bring to their new life in Christ. Some converts are Jewish by birth; some are Gentile; some have been practicing religion all their lives, some have no religious pedigree whatsoever. It's no wonder that such diverse people embody their new faith in contradictory ways. Paul cites three issues in particular that are causing dissension in the Roman church: whether to eat meat or just vegetables (vv. 2, 6); whether to drink or abstain from wine (v. 21); and whether to observe certain days as holy or whether to regard all days as holy (vv. 5-6).

What is striking here is that Paul does not take sides. He appears far less interested in the relative merits of each side's argument than with the impact of these arguments on the life of the community as a whole. He laments the fact that they are "quarreling over opinions" (v. 1) – to the point that they are judging and even despising their brothers and sisters (v. 11). For his own part, Paul is surprisingly tolerant of these varying forms of religious practice, and he urges the Romans to be equally tolerant.

This is not to say that Paul places all religious customs and those who practice them on equal footing. In this passage he does distinguish between those he calls the "weak" (14:1-2) and the "strong" (15:1). Apparently for Paul, the weak are those who are taking a narrow line, while the strong are taking a broader line. For example, the weak are rigorous in their insistence on vegetarianism, whereas the strong are less rigorous and "believe in eating anything" (v. 2). The weak are conservative in insisting that one day is better than another, whereas the strong are more liberal in insisting that all days are alike (v. 5).

Thus, one group wants to make sharp distinctions, whereas the other group sees shades of gray. One sees unbreakable principles at stake; the other sees principles as more flexible guidelines. One argues that to concede this point means that the whole house of cards collapses; the other argues that if the house is that fragile, perhaps it should collapse. One sees a crucial point hanging in the balance; the other doubts whether this one point is the single axis on which the whole religious universe turns. Small circles versus large circles. Narrow boundaries versus wider boundaries. Black and white versus shades of gray. Obedience to the law versus a gospel of freedom.

And how does Paul respond? Well, we all know that two sets of eyes can see things differently – on matters of personal taste, or political persuasion, or loyalty to a sports team. But Paul goes a step further: he insists that even the eyes of faith can see things differently. The

religious positions being held here are polar opposites, mutually exclusive. He makes no effort to harmonize them or impose uniformity. Some of the Roman Christians believe that it is appropriate to eat meat; others believe that a religiously devout person should only eat veggies. Some believe that the Sabbath day is holy; others believe that all days are holy. Two contrasting perspectives, and never the twain shall meet! However, Paul allows that completely different positions can stem from the same motive – honoring the Lord and giving thanks to God (v. 6). It's not that one is operating with sinister motives, the other with pure motives. Both are genuinely attempting to live properly before the Lord. Good and pure religious convictions can manifest themselves in radically different ways.

Friends, does any of this sound familiar? Think about the issues that divide Christians today – traditional worship versus contemporary worship; the place of homosexuals within the church; how to overcome the disparities between rich and poor, black and white; the priority of racial justice versus the priority of law and order; yes, even the proper way of coping with a pandemic! If the Epistle to the Romans is any indication, I think I know what Paul would say to the Church in our time. He would say that the differences among us are real and significant. In the end, some positions may prove to be more truthful and faithful than others; but all positions deserve to be heard and respected. We can honor each other's motives even when we do not agree with each other's conclusions. We can accept the fact that persons who are equally committed to Christ and sincere in their convictions can see things differently. I may disagree with you about how wide the circle should be drawn in the life of the church, but that doesn't give me license to draw you out of the circle.

Paul goes on to offer another perspective, this time using the words I have quoted so often in my funeral sermons. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves” (v. 7). Again, Paul is not speaking to people who are on their deathbed or to those who are mourning the dead. He is speaking to persons who are very much alive and are caught up in conflict with others about how they practice their religion. And make no mistake about it: what Paul is saying here is a challenge to all of us who prize our own opinions and tend to dismiss the differing opinions of others. In a nutshell, Paul is saying No to radical individualism. No one is an island. An “individual Christian” is an oxymoron. People of faith live in relationship to other people of faith. Being religious does not mean being solitary or exclusive. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.”

And why not? Because we live and die to the Lord (v. 8). Christ alone is “the Lord of both the dead and the living” (v. 9). We cannot be both “in the Lord” and “in ourselves.” To be “in the Lord” is to recognize a larger dominion than the world of self. God's dominion is bigger than what we believe and how we choose to live out our faith as individuals. To put it bluntly, God's truth and our own perception of God's truth are not necessarily the same.

Above all, to be “in the Lord” means that all of us – even those with whom we disagree – are ultimately accountable to God and God alone (v. 12). This is what prompts Paul to ask, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (v. 10). In other words, when we realize that we are all ultimately accountable to God, we are not so likely to hold others accountable to us. Our inclination to pass judgment on others diminishes. For one thing, in the presence of God we become painfully aware of our own inadequacies and blind spots. The light of God makes us so transparent that we find it difficult to place others under the beam of our investigative light. To

recognize that God passes judgment on us makes us less ready to pass judgment on others, much less to despise them.

Friends, if we were to take Paul's advice seriously today, Christian individuals would be less judgmental and Christian communities would be more livable. This would not make us any less variegated in the convictions we hold or in the religious lifestyles to which those convictions lead us. But it would place our diversity under the scrutiny of the Lord of the living and the dead, rather than under the watchful eye of those bent on making us in their image and likeness. It would set us free from those who think that the boundaries of life and death are theirs to define – and to guard. It would, in a word, place our destiny in the hands of God, not in the hands of those who think they can do God's work better than even God can do it.

And so, the next time we rush to judgment of others or feel the wrath of their judgment on us, let us remember: "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Simply stated, you and I need to let God be the judge.