September 13, 2026 Pastor Barry South, CP First Presbyterian Church Grand Bay

Sermon: "We Live to the Lord"
Scripture: Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; For God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.
Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also, those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.
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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.
Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or your sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.
THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

In a contemporary world filled with violence, being equipped to address conflict is of vital importance. In these verses Paul offers a spiritual prescription to prevent conflict. Those of us who have spent our lives serving the church know that religious communities quarrel. Quarrels can fester and remain unresolved. Paul reminds us that the root of conflict is not only differences of opinion but also powerful differentials. Paul encouraged the Romans, the people of the empire, not just to tolerate those who were weak in faith, but to show hospitality, to go the extra mile and make the weak feel welcomed.
Maybe you have heard the story of the stranger who came into a small town one day and stood in the center of Town Square. He had on a very strange coat. It was black and sewn onto it were patches of cloth of all sizes, shapes, and colors. As word spread of this strange visitor, the townspeople gathered around in curious silence. Finally, a brave soul dared to ask about the significance of the unique coat. The stranger immediately began to point to different patches and explained that they represented the sins of different people of the town. Embarrassed, some people left the square. Indignant, others shook their heads in denial of the accusations. After explaining every patch and denouncing every sin, the man turned around and headed out of town. On his back was a large dark piece of cloth that covered almost his entire back. The townspeople wondered out loud what, and whose, sin that patch represented. Suddenly a voice rang out loud and clear; "That represents his own sins, for he is willing to point out the shortcomings of others and yet fails to see his own."
The Gospel of Matthew puts it this way: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3) Scripture warns us about being quick to judge others in light of our own opinions and ways. As believers we are called to live in community. Many seem to form community only with those who are in complete agreement with their opinions or way of seeing things. Gospel living is a constant challenge of the status quo of daily living.
We are called to live in a community in a way that pushes us out of our comfort zones, inviting us to listen and learn from others who see things from different perspectives. In trying to hold on to our usual ways, we limit the power of transformation that the Gospel is constantly calling us to experience. As in any system, we are only as strong as the weaker members of our community. Paul, insist we receive into the community those who may be weak in the faith, and those who see things in different manners.

The invitation is not to engage individuals in debate, or to try to change them into what we are or think they should be, but rather to embrace all people as equals in Christ.
How do the weak and strong manage to live together, as one in Christ ? Gal. 3:28 says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ." Are the weak those who suffer from substance abuse? Are the weak at-risk homeless parishioners with serious mental-health issues? Are the weak and vulnerable new immigrants, orphaned from their war-torn countries of origin?
Theologically, do we see the weak as fundamentalist who have a narrow belief system? Likewise, do we perceive the strong as progressives? Could the opposite also be true? 1Corinthians 1:20 ask, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?
There are people in churches who like to throw their weight around. They feel that because they are founding members of the church, or have contributed substantially to the church, they are "strong". Others may think that because they occupy positions in the church or have some theological training, they have an advantage over others in the congregation. The problem is that we want to define strength and weakness from concepts that are counter to the manner in which they are defined in the realm of God.
Our strength comes not from our traditions or our church membership. Strength is not defined by how much Bible we know, or even how much we contribute financially to the congregation. Our strength lies in understanding that the integrity with which we live our lives is tied directly to how our beliefs guide our actions.
Unfortunately, there is a great discrepancy in this area when the strong are willing to point out the shortcomings of others and fail to see that this action in itself points to their own spiritual weakness. There are many who self-identify as "strong Christians," when the truth of the matter is that their judgmental spirit renders them weak in the eyes of God and the community.
In the church in Rome there was tension regarding appropriate religious practices between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians knew what it meant to be observant Jews, but what did it mean to be observant Gentile Christians? Are observant Christian's vegetarians, or can they eat meat? Must they abstain from alcohol, or is it acceptable to have a glass of wine? What does it mean to observe the Sabbath? Are just certain days Holy, or are all days Holy? Paul was aware that in this emerging Christian Church there were many different beliefs and religious practices. What does it mean today to be an observant Christian? Is it necessary to wear a cross, carry a Bible, support freedom of choice? Do we need to confess that we are born again?
What, for that matter, does it mean to be an observant Jew or Muslim? Are all Jews pro-Israel? Must a Muslim woman wear a burka and be subservient to her husband?
Paul wrote to an emerging Christian community in Rome with people of very different traditions and worldwide views. What do we do when our beliefs and our practices differ (v. 1-4)? What does it mean to be an emerging church today, attempting to integrate members from many different faith traditions? How does Paul appeal to the unchurched in Rome, the Gentile Christians, without alienating those who hold a deep religious tradition, the Jewish Christians?
In the midst of strong differences of opinion (v.3), Paul does not take sides. Paul attempts to mediate the situation. His concern is to prevent the sides from becoming so polarized that they no longer respect each other. He reminds them that whether or not they follow specific dietary rules, God welcomes them as children of God.
When we come together, we come celebrating our differences. We come knowing that some are struggling, others rejoicing in newfound victories, and some are just coasting along – but that is all right. Sadly, many have lost their joy in being part of a faith community. The joyful celebrations of community life have given way to tradition-burdened rituals that have lost the capacity to bring joy to the heart.
The spiritual walk of many persons is a long list of Do's and Don'ts. This was not Christ's intention when he invited people to be his followers. Many have referred to Paul's letter to the Romans, which

contains our Scripture for today, as the Freedom Letter. In other words, permission is granted here to live a relationship with Christ in a manner that makes sense and can be enjoyed. Nevertheless, many find their strength in becoming church police, enforcing church policies that serve no real purpose other than to rob the community of its vitality and newness.

One group believes that the "Right Way" is to rely solely on text of old interpreted literally, and the other group is adamant that the "Right Way" is to believe that God is being revealed in new ways to each generation. Both groups are "in their camps" and are sure their positions are the right ones. How do we deal with conflict when people have become polarized in their viewpoints?

Paul argues that there is a third way. This third way is the faith way. Paul acknowledges that devout people can hold radically different convictions and still be good and faithful people. Paul is helping persons in the early Christian community to resist demonizing each other by teaching them to respectfully disagree.

Paul is community focused: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves" (v.7). Paul again emphasizes that we are part of a larger whole. Romans 12:4-5 states, "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another". Or 1Corinthians 12:20, "As it is, there are many parts yet one body." Paul writes, "If we live, we live in the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord" (v.8). Paul recognizes that in Christ there is no place for self-centeredness, because as Christians our entire life ultimately is centered on Christ. Another theme is the issue of judgment. Notice how Paul encourages people not to judge others' religious practices. He acknowledges that there is a human tendency for people to judge.

"Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike" (v.5). All too often our tendency to judge others, especially those deemed as inferior because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious background, justifies hatred and demonization of entire groups of people.

God invites us into an experience that has significance and purpose for our lives. That does not mean the same thing for every member of our faith community. Sometimes discovering or rediscovering that joy requires that we come out of our comfort zones, into a willingness to try new things. With this comes the responsibility of tolerance. Our spiritual practices, as well as our daily living, must grow from our own convictions, not convictions of others. Otherwise, our spiritual practices become empty rituals, devoid of significance and the power to transform.

As additional people come into our churches bringing with them other experiences, rituals, and traditions, songs, and practices, how do we react? Do we act strong and try to impose our ways on them?

Do we embrace the beauty of diversity and look forward to the new experiences that might bring new joy to our lives as we live as a community of faith? God calls us to live as a community that embraces all and sees all as equal, so that together our knees will bow before God.

PRAYER: Eternal God, your hand shaped our lives by grace and your hand rescued us from sin by love. May your hand guide us through this day, shielding us from all evil, strengthening us to do justice and love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

BENEDICTION: Welcome those who are weak, Paul counsels. Be tolerant of differences. Remember that people come to know and love God though diverse experiences and religious practices. Focus not on the splinter in your neighbor's eye, but rather on the log in your own. God is God of all people, even those we struggle to accept. The focus of the faith community is not judgment, for that is God's realm, but rather pursuing "What makes for peace and mutual upbuilding".

GO IN PEACE!