**September 17, 2017**

**Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35**

 Americans enjoy the freedom, the right, and the responsibility of voting. Many people are glad to express their opinions around elections. It is one of the many privileges we experience in this country. Politics were often dinner conversation in my family. Different opinions were always present; we were not of like minds. Watching my parents engage the world and our elected officials, my brother and I learned the importance of thoughtful and provocative discourse. We approach elections from very different perspectives, and often joke about the fact that we cancel out one another's votes in most elections. But even though we disagree more often than not, we still love each other. We continue to call one another when we have questions about a political party or theological point. Over the years we have talked some issues to death. And while we still frustrate one another, while we don’t understand how the other can’t see it the way we can, we always end conversations by saying, "Thank you. I’m glad to understand more of why you think that way. Let’s agree to disagree." Our continued conversation and our love for one another shows our commitment to our relationship and our family, over and above any opinion or action we might have or do.

Over these last chapters in Romans, Paul wrote about the importance of unity amongst the family of God. He stressed that differences of opinion were not worth fighting about. Folks with different backgrounds and practices could still love and respect one another and remain one church family—and *especially* not lose their witness to those outside the church even when they disagreed about things inside the church. The whole point of being church together is being church together. Don’t be the stumbling block for someone. Help them along. Because we’re family. Don’t stomp out the door when differences are encountered, but stick around to hear more. Because we’re family. Don’t stand in the parking lot judging someone else’s opinions or actions, but welcome them into the church. Because we’re family. God welcomed you. God welcomed them. God welcomes all.

We are part of the same family in Christ. The same Lord, the same faith, the same baptism. We are God’s children. It is not the children’s place to judge others in the family; that privilege is reserved for parents. Thus, Paul told the Roman church, “Who are *you* to pass judgment on someone else? We all stand before the judgment seat of God. You should expect God to uphold others, for God *is able to* make us all stand.” It is not our place to judge anyone else. It is not our place to deem anyone wrong or foolish or unworthy. God alone has the privilege of judging us all. God alone holds us accountable for what we’ve said and done and thought and been. God alone knows the truth about us, so God alone is worthy of being our judge. And Paul said to expect that judgment to include grace. “God *is able to* make us all stand.”

It’s great news that there is room for everyone. It’s great news that God alone is our judge. It’s great news that God is a graceful judge. But the more we think about it, the trickier it sounds. If we are waiting for somebody to receive their comeuppance on judgment day, we are going to be disappointed. They aren’t going to get it. The worst gets the same treatment as the best. This means that our brother won’t be punished for kicking us. This means that our sister won’t be sent to time out for mouthing off. Instead, they will be welcomed home. God will offer grace. Because God is our loving parent. And regardless of how perfect or disobedient children are, there is no denying our connection.

Churches are notorious for dividing ourselves into different camps – beyond the Catholic and Protestant break, there are at least 18 types of Presbyterians in the United States (we are in the largest group) and at least 80 types of Baptists. Churches are quick to stall and shut down when disagreements surface. It is common practice amongst Christians to point fingers and call names and threaten the loss of salvation or incurring damnation. We must pause and remember: we are family. Brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, children of the one Lord. It’s not our place to judge one another, but our privilege to be church together.

God has gone to great lengths to keep us all together. Christ even died so that he could be with us in death. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” We are not our own. We are part of God’s family. Not just the faithful, not just the best, not the oldest or the youngest or the cutest… Together, we are family. We are in it together. Whether we are right or wrong, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.

This is a beautiful expression of our unity in Christ. We are bound to one another through Jesus Christ. We are bound to one another through God’s grace. And Paul reminded us that we should act like we belong together. Together with God, and together with one another.

After two years, I have heard many stories about our “little church with the big heart.” When asked about what you love about Sweet Hollow, folks always name the deep friendship and caring attitude that you share for one another. You have done a wonderful job of bringing new members into the heart of the community, making people feel welcome and a significant part of this family. When I interviewed with the PNC several years ago, I was told that you didn’t have any conflicts. It sounded nice, but that is not the whole truth of who you are. The truth is that we are human, and we have disagreements. There are different opinions about how to do Sunday School and how to take care of our property (and what to fix on our property) and how Communion should be served and how to manage our finances. Dare I say it, we even have conflicts. Some conflicts have lasted decades, while others quickly come and go. The challenge Paul offered here is to continue to sit with one another in the midst of those conflicts. We are challenged not to give up or walk away or become self-righteous, but to stay in it. To keep listening. The challenge is to abstain from passing judgment on someone else with a different opinion. The challenge is to build them up, not cause self-doubt or a break in their relationship with God or this community. Because we’re family. It’s not about being right. It’s about being in relationship.

This means that when we are in committee meetings, everyone has a voice. And when we are in congregational meetings, everyone has a vote. There are different opinions present, and difficult conversations to be had, but at the end of the day, we belong together. Together with God, and together with one another.

This means that the “traditional way” must make room for new ideas and possibilities.

This means that the pastor is not always right, nor church members always wrong.

This means that when we come to those times and issues and people that raise the judgment flags in our minds, or when we want to stop listening, or when we want to walk away, we must be even more diligent in opening our ears and hearts to one another. Together, we are family. We are in it together. Whether we are right or wrong, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.

As we come into the fall season, enter a new stewardship season, and begin to consider what’s next for Sweet Hollow, let us abound in our welcome of one another. However similar or different we are, let us make space at this Table to reflect the space we are each given at the eternal banquet Table. Let us treat one another honorably and respectfully, always lifting one another up, though we may choose different ways or words. For “who are *we* to pass judgment on someone else? We all stand before the judgment seat of God… We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” Thanks be to God. Amen.