

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
September 17, 2023
Romans 14:1–13

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

Last week we looked at passages from the Gospel of Matthew and Paul's letter to the Roman church which focused on issues of conflict. We continue with this theme in the 14th chapter of Romans. This is right in the middle of a section of the letter that Paul has written about the pragmatics of practicing the faith. Specifically, he is writing to a community that is made up of a diversity of believers. The book of Romans is the longest letter we have from the Apostle Paul, and it is considered by many to be his most thoughtful and complete theological work. He spends the first part of the letter outlining the love that God has for humanity. In the second half of the letter Paul emphasizes the love that those in the faith community must show to others because of the love they have received from God. These series of exhortations bring to bear the love and mercy of God on the Christian community in practical ways. The passage focuses on internal matters. Specifically, Paul addresses the relationship among people who find themselves at opposite ends on two specific issues: whether certain foods are appropriate to eat, and whether certain days, festival days, deserve more honor than others.

Listen for a word from God.

Romans 14:1-13

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those 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. ⁴Who 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.

⁵Some 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. ⁶Those 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. ⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If 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. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰Why 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. ¹¹For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God. ¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

When people are first married, they are in a honeymoon phase. Everything is wonderful and you enjoy each other's quirks. The couple is blissful and carefree and take delight in one another. Everything the other does – from the way they eat to the stories they tell – is endearing and charming. And then at some point, the honeymoon phase begins to wear off. Will my partner always leave their socks on the floor? Do they really not know how to load the dishwasher properly? Or which direction the toilet paper is supposed to hang. Isn't it so cute when I can hear their entire phone conversation from two rooms away? With the door closed.

It is inevitable that if we live amongst one another there are patterns and practices that will make us at odds with other people. When we inhabit the same space and we share time together, and when you throw in that the space and time is sacred and special the question will come up, “what do we do when we have disagreements?” “How do we live together when we treasure the way we do things, but we think the way other people do them is wrong?”

This is exactly what Paul is addressing in his letter to the Roman church. To be even more clear, to house churches in Rome. Churches would have been organized as smaller gatherings in various homes. The letter Paul wrote would have been shared from house church to house church. These matters may be even more pressing, because the people in the house church are in intimate spaces and know one another well. It isn't like they are in large sanctuaries where someone can just go and sit far away from someone that annoys them. These are more like extended family gatherings. In his letter, Paul digs into issues on judgement and discriminations, and disparaging remarks around issues of personal preference, as I mentioned before, particularly around eating and honoring particular festival days.

This passage seems so contemporary to me. If you have been around church long enough, or sat in church committee meetings, I am sure you have been a part of a conversation or disagreement about seemingly very unimportant things but were argued as if they were matters of eternal salvation. I have been a part of or heard about conversations and disagreements about the color of carpet, the size the bread is cut for communion, the type of bread used for communion, whether drums belong in the sanctuary, or screens, or children. (Yes, yes, and yes).

More recently I have heard of conversations about the necessity of streaming worship or not. I have heard people (not at this church) say that if someone stays at home and streams worship that that really isn't worshipping. This person's argument wasn't that the experience was different, but rather that it wasn't really worship unless the person was in the sanctuary. Of course, I cannot imagine not offering worship over some sort of streaming service. It has been a lifeline for people unable to join in person. And I trust the people I have heard from that say, that while the experience is different than being in person, it is still meaningful and worshipful for that person.

Paul isn't making moral judgements on the particularities of the differences in community practice. What is at issue for Paul is that each group claims to have the moral high ground over the other and they are being judgmental about those practices. One group is vegetarian, the other group will eat meat. Some people celebrate festival days, others do not. Each group is becoming self-righteous in their opinion of the other group with whom they disagree. Paul knows that the believers need to figure out how to be together in their disagreement because separation from one another is not an option. Paul says that to be judgmental is not what God desires, particularly as these practices are not essential to the faith.

And there is the rub, there is the difficult thing. How do we know when something isn't essential to the faith, isn't part of the center of the gospel, but rather is something peripheral that allows for choice and different expressions and practices of faith? It's one thing to disagree on what we eat, how we celebrate certain holidays, what color the carpet should be in the sanctuary, or whether we use contemporary music or more standard hymns. But it is a whole other thing when we start to talk about things like how we steward the earth's resources and care for creation, whether any war is just, abortion, or justice for LGBTQIA+ persons. How do we know when our disagreements are non-negotiable essentials of the faith and core to our belief?

One of the best and most frustrating things about the Presbyterian Church is that we have a generous orthodoxy and an ever-evolving faith. One of the great mottos from the Reformation, from where Presbyterianism was formed, was *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda!* Which is loosely translated as, "a church reformed and always being reformed." It stemmed from the idea that the church had gone astray, and it needed to be changed. Or more accurately, it needed to go back to some source material, that is scripture. The changes that reformers wanted were not just change for change's sake, rather, they believed they were adhering to a closer reading of scripture. The fuller phrase from the Reformation can also be "the church reformed, always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit."ⁱ

Of course, this does not settle the conundrum of disagreement about what is essential or non-negotiable because we disagree plenty on what scripture says. About forty years ago, the Presbyterian Church created a guide to help church people understand how to approach scripture.ⁱⁱ The guide outlined a number of things, some of which were specific guidelines on how scripture can be rightly used and interpreted. It talked about literary structures, historical context, and cultural conditioning of

language over time. The guidelines talk about how to balance scripture with the use of knowledge and the use of personal experience. It lays out the importance of the centrality of witness to the life of Jesus. It talks about making sure you are looking at the whole of scripture and not just a few verses when discerning a particular issue or disagreement. And it talks about the “rule of love,” meaning that all interpretation is under the lens of “the fundamental expression of God’s will is the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor and all interpretations are to be judged by the question whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God.” It also talks about how we might be wrong.

When someone is being ordained in the Presbyterian church, for deacon, ruling elder, or pastor they are asked many questions, part of one of which is “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith...?” If you have been ordained, you have answered “yes” to this question. The tricky thing is, we have never explicitly articulated what those essential are because we knew the faith and God are not static. We cannot say once and for all time, this is what we believe. Remember – once reformed, always being reformed. So, again, what happens when we disagree?

In the early 2000’s, as the PCUSA was disagreeing on a number of important issues, including and most vocally on the ordination of LGBTQ persons, and whether pastors could preside at same-gender weddings, a task force was created to help find a way in our disagreement. This task force recovered a practice that started in the Presbyterian church in 1729 when the Westminster confessions were adopted for the fledgling Presbyterian church in the United States. This practice allowed for freedom of conscience in matters not essential to the faith. If someone thought a particular belief was non-essential, they could “scruple” that belief. The local governing body then had to decide

if the persons scruple was essential or not. It required discernment and discussion. It led to more disagreement.

Perhaps you have noticed that I have not answered my own question about how we know if something is essential or not. Spoiler alert – I’m not going to answer the question. Or maybe, the best answer is, “it depends.” I chose to live into the tradition of the Presbyterian church that has never written down or declared the essentials for all time. I choose to live into the ambiguity and the discomfort of struggling with scripture and my fellow Christians, knowing that I might be wrong. I choose to err on the side of love as much as possible. I try to be open to new understanding and possibility. I try to make sure I am living into a holy discernment as I seek with others to make determinations on what is right and true, as opposed to a “judgy-ness” that seeks to denigrate and dismiss my fellow believers. And I try to do that in both the small things and the big things.

Notice Paul doesn’t tell the church at Rome what the right answer is either. He is more concerned about the absence of love and unity amongst the church. The particular practices of how they embody their faith, how they eat and celebrate, are peripheral to how they treat one another. And more specifically, Paul directs most of his ire at those that are stronger in the faith over against those that are weaker. The ending sentence of this section admonishes the faithful not to be a stumbling block to another’s journey of faith. Paul calls for a community where everything is directed toward honoring God, and therefore honoring the other. The rule of love. Our actions should inhabit God’s generous welcome. God should be at the center of our lives, even in the mundane tasks. Every ordinary action, Paul suggests, can be aimed for the benefit of the neighbor. That is honoring to God.

One writer comments, “It is tough to praise God if you are busy passing judgment on other people.”ⁱⁱⁱ The passage reminds us that we all fall short when we stand before God – so we should be more gracious with one another, particularly when we disagree. The passage tells us to let hospitality and welcome be our primary judgement. We should learn to live with each other’s failings as much as possible. And, in fact, make sure those of us who are stronger make greater effort to help the weak. And, if we are being honest, don’t many of us think we are the “stronger” when we have a disagreement, and those other people are the ones who just don’t get it yet?

There is another phrase from the Reformed tradition that says, “In essentials unity, in all else charity,” That is, there will be those things, as I said last week, that are absolutely non-negotiable. They are essential and core to the gospel as we understand it. In those things, there should be unity (even if it takes some time to understand what those are or might be). But in all else, let there be grace and kindness. We can agree to disagree and in disagreeing let us not be disagreeable.

Amen.

ⁱ Anna Case-Winters, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/ecclesia-reformata/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/_resolutions/scripture-use.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Audrey West, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-24/commentary-on-romans-141-12-5>