

Judging, Discerning, and Belonging to Christ
Romans 14:1-12

“Judge not lest ye be judged.” It’s among the more famous words Jesus ever said and one we invoke any time someone complains about our behavior. In our passage this morning, Paul is speaking to much the same issue.

And let’s be clear: from my perspective, one of the most grievous insults you can ever give to a church or to a congregation or to a denomination is to say that it is judgmental. Almost instinctively, we know that being judgmental cuts against the Christian grain.

Pharisees judge. Legalists judge. Christians welcome. Christians offer grace. Christians offer mercy. As for me, I think churches are better off being too merciful instead of too judgmental.

But we have to be careful. The people of Christ must walk a narrow path. Fall off on the side of judging, then you destroy one of the very foundations upon which our faith was founded. Yet fall off on the other side, the side that says any kind of judging or commentary or expectations of behavior are out of bounds, then you make a mockery of the new life Christ comes to offer. Christ came to forgive our sins; he did not die on the cross so that we could be free to do whatever we want and expect no consequences from our actions.

Well, what does St. Paul have to say about all this? He's writing to the body of Christ that is seeking to survive against incredible odds. They are living in the capital city of a great pagan empire, and the church is made up of folks who came from that pagan world and also folks who came from the world of Jewish law.

Needless to say, different folks had different opinions about how to live out the faith. And such was their quarreling that it threatened to divide and even destroy the church.

We're no longer sure of what the exact disputes were precisely about, but we get a flavor. Evidently some folks said it was OK to eat meat, presumably meat that might have come from the pagan marketplaces. But after all, beef is beef and lamb is lamb, so what's the big deal? Others said, "It is a big deal, for you are sullying the faith," so they ate only vegetables.

And some Christians were fasting, others feasting. And Paul's perspective is one we might want to remember: he says, welcome one another. And he uses a word that is far stronger than "tolerate." Welcome one another, embrace one another despite your differences of opinion.

He talks about those who are strong in faith debating with those who are weak in the faith,

and you get the impression that he is being slightly ironic: we always believe we are the ones strong in the faith and those who have different opinions are the ones weak in the faith. . . and they think the same about us.

Notice he doesn't say, fight it out. He doesn't say, debate until one of you convinces the other. Now we don't necessarily like what Paul says, because we want to be sure of our position. But Paul says, don't turn the church into a debating society. Welcome the other, but not for the sake of quarreling over opinions. Vegetables or meat. . . what does that have to do with salvation, in other words.

And what about worship? Were some of the Jewish background holding special Christian services on the old Jewish holy days? Perhaps. Again, Paul says, some hold some days more special than others, while others hold all days to be alike: however you worship, worship in the name of the Lord.

Now all this debating took place almost two thousand years ago, but don't we hear echoes of this even today? The issues are different, but the principle is the same.

Not to shake you up this morning, but I need to tell you that whatever your particular belief, theology, whatever your particular view of how to read the Bible, whatever your

interpretation of this passage or that, whatever your belief that these are or are not the end times, whatever your views on predestination or free-will, whatever your belief about infant or adult baptism, or of spanking or not spanking children, whatever your political affiliation, there is probably a Christian somewhere who thinks you are not really a Christian.

If you are a Democrat; there is a Christian somewhere who cannot believe you could ever be a Christian. If you are a Republican, there is a Christian somewhere who cannot believe you could ever be a Christian. Same with pro-war anti-war, pro death penalty, anti- death penalty.

Some Christians think that only the King James Version of the Bible is authoritative. Other think that the more modern translations are better, because they are based on better and older Biblical manuscripts. Our inclination is to prove ourselves to be correct, to show the other where he or she is wrong; Paul's call is for us not to win a point, but to welcome a brother or sister.

But how can we possibly get along when the other one is so obviously wrong, at least from our perspective? Paul says, it's because of our deeper identity: we live and we die to nothing less than the Lord.

We belong to Jesus. That is our bedrock identity. And Paul invites us to welcome one another, cherish one another on that basis. Now, this is easier said than done. Paul himself could be quite harsh with those who disagreed with him, but he was not the first, nor the last Christian who found it difficult to live up to his ideals.

Before we take offense at another position, we must ask ourselves: is this opinion really central to our identity in Jesus Christ? Because sometimes our opinions lead us astray. I recall serving a church in which there was a shy teenage girl, uncertain about herself in so many ways. Through the years, she began to become more confident as a person and as a Christian.

And one day she came to church with a new haircut. Short. And most of the folks told LeAnn how good she looked. But then her Sunday School teacher said, "don't you know that short hair is unBiblical?" She was crushed. Did her teacher really speak from Christ, or rather from his particular point of view?

Paul would have been disappointed. He preached tirelessly that in Christ we are set free from cultural attitudes, from trivial laws and perspectives.

I've told you before how disappointed I was in a church member who left the church

because the church was going to be served by a pastor of a different race. He said, "My late mother never would have approved of such a thing." Well, Paul says it should be Christ, not our mother and not our culture, that determines our actions, our attitudes. Our personal background, culture, desires and wishes must never take precedence over Christ is how the Biblical Scholar N.T. Wright puts it.

By the way, this is why if a church, like ours, has an American Flag in the sanctuary, it must be placed in such a position that the Christian flag has the place of more honor. The American Way is often a good and wonderful guide for how we are to live; but it is not an ultimate guide. Our ultimate guide is not the American Flag or the American Way, but rather the Cross.

So, how do we sort all this out? We are to be charitable with one another's opinions. Welcome, accept, embrace folks who see things differently. And we are never to judge another's fitness for heaven.

At the same time, it is fair for Christians to discern which behavior is helpful and which is not helpful. It is one thing to have a different opinion. It is another to engage in behavior that brings dishonor to Christ. In fact, right before this passage, Paul has spoken to this very point: let us live honorably, as in the day, let us put aside works of darkness, let us not

descend to debauchery and quarreling and jealousy.

To be set free from the law is not an invitation to live as we want; it is an invitation to live as Christ wants us to live. As Christians we know some behavior is out of bounds. And we proclaim what it means to live a holy life. But at the same time, we would never, ever, dare to say that any one is beyond Christ's power to redeem.

So, where does all this leave us? It leaves us with comfort: we are not to worry that some opinion we hold is going to keep us out of heaven; those who fast and those who feast, those who take the Bible literally and those who interpret it in other ways, are all welcome in the kingdom.

It leaves us with a challenge: to discern what is central and what is minor in the living of our faith; it leaves us with the challenge always to find our bedrock identity in nothing less than the teaching, the life, and the example of Jesus Christ.

And it leaves us with this hope: even as each of us will be accountable to God, each of us will be accepted into eternity by Christ, who knows our thoughts, knows our opinions, knows our strengths and knows our weaknesses, and loves us anyway. Amen.