

Romans 14:1-12
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“Judgement and Church Squabbles”

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As a child, I learned sayings from the bible which are probably the real foundation of my faith yet today. Even after college and seminary education, lifelong learning about the bible, these sayings are what I turn to when I am trying to figure out how to be faithful, compassionate, loving, and forgiving. I lean on them as I try to decipher right from wrong, good from bad. Sayings like, “love your neighbor, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, turn the other cheek, forgive others as God has forgiven you, and as you helped one of the least of these you helped me,” have stuck with me since childhood. Another important one is suggested in today’s reading, “judge not, lest you be judged.”

In Romans, Paul wades into controversy. Some of Christ’s followers believed firmly that they should not eat meat. This was not a vegetarian commitment in the interest of animals, but fear that meat might be contaminated as it was often slaughtered by people belonging to pagan temples. The feelings on this issue ran so deep some who had converted from pagan temples to Judaism would have quickly condemned their new Jewish brothers and sisters who did eat meat. They would say things like, “We can’t tolerate being in a church where meat eating is tolerated.” We hear echoes of this intensity in debates which the church faces today.

So, the question Paul seeks to address is something like: “When two sides are both claiming Jesus as savior, and leaning on Christ as their source of righteousness, and yet the church disagrees, what do we do? Paul simply says, “Welcome one another and put up with each other’s failings.”

Paul offers three reasons to bear with those who think and act differently from oneself on matters of faith. First, he says, “What people are doing, they are doing in honor of the lord.” When one side immediately confronts another with instant condemnation we rarely create an environment for dialogue. Condemnation draws a line in the sand. Paul knows this, so if another person’s faith seems silly or just plain wrong to us, Paul wants us to remember the importance of a judgement free zone when we decide to engage each other about our differences.

Secondly Paul suggests, one’s beliefs and practice are an expression of their understanding of Christ as Lord. Living in the day to day world we struggle with a lot of powers and influences in our life. For Christians, every belief and practice should serve the purpose of refocusing us on one truth: Our loyalty and devotion are to God, as re-presented through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the Living Spirit.

Finally, Paul writes that bearing with those whose practices and beliefs are different from ours is a way of emphasizing God is judge of all of us, and one judge is enough. If Jesus is our lord that implies critique and submission of all the other powers seeking to rule our life. Political,

economic, familial, all influences ultimately fall under the judgement of the Holy and divine One.

But, there are exceptions to Paul's "judge not" rule and a closer look at Romans 14 makes this clear. When Paul speaks about the subjects on which followers are not to pass judgement, he uses the word "dialogismos." This word points to those debatable matters that people tend to disagree on but which do not fundamentally effect the justice, love and forgiveness we are called by God to create in the world. In this passage Paul is not referring to matters of justice for the oppressed, or peace for the embattled, in those situations Paul admonishes Jesus' followers to make the world a better place.

This means congregations today needs to have critical conversations about which issues of faith and belief are debatable, which ones we can allow diversity, and which matters are central to faith. This may be one of the great challenges of the church today and it may determine the relevance of congregations in the future.

Still, we sometimes wonder how does the church find itself squabbling about non-essentials. Historical Jesus Scholar, Dr. Marcus Borg, updated and published his Doctoral thesis as a book titled, "Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus." In the book, he argues Jesus was born into a religious world ruled by a purity code. This Purity or Holiness code turned faith in God into a set of requirements one had to follow. If you followed you were faithful, if you didn't you were out. This code ruled every aspect of life; what a person could and couldn't eat, what a person could and couldn't wear, who could and who could not enter the temple, who was considered clean and who was unclean, every aspect of daily life. In the first century, this purity code had become a standard which was regularly abused to the advantage of many in power who decreed and defended it, abused in ways which brought them great material gain often at the cost to everyday people just trying to be faithful within the confines of the system they were given.

Into this world Jesus is born, and Dr. Borg argues Jesus saw the inequalities and injustices created by the purity code and it's gatekeepers, and our Lord and Savior initiated a fundamentally different, countercultural standard of faith which springs from a commitment, not to purity, but to compassion. Dr. Borg suggests compassion is at the very center of Jesus' activity and teaching, including; Jesus' inclusive meal practices in a day of segregated social dining, Jesus parables and teaching about a kindom of equals which has been inaugurated on earth instead of simply providing a reward after death. Jesus role as social prophet and boundary breaker sought to dismantle the system of domination created by the purity code, and reinforced by the occupation of Rome.

When a community of faith is founded in compassion, discussions about our diverse beliefs and practices can happen without condemnation of one side or the other. This is the community Paul calls us to be, together, when he says, "welcome one another and put up with each other's failings."

It is Christ's community of compassion, love and justice which Paul calls upon in Romans today. Paul wants to alert the church, then and now, that we don't have to argue every single issue of belief and practice. Yet, through the use of his language Paul does remind us there are issues to which the church is called universally to practice compassion and Justice.

Jesus came deeply challenging the system of domination not to replace it with another system of domination, but to initiate a mighty kingdom of God's Compassion. He came with a vision grounded in God's unconditional love, which teaches us, "love your neighbor, love your enemy, love the stranger, turn the other cheek, forgive others as God has forgiven you, go the extra mile, offer your cloak as well, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the peacemakers, and as you helped one of the least of these you helped me." And for the church, if your diverse beliefs and practices do not restrain you from creating the kingdom of equals, the one we pray for each week 'to come on earth as it is in heaven,' then , "judge not, lest you be judged."

Amen