

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 slaves 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 for the Lord. Also those who eat, eat for the Lord, since they give thanks to God, while those who abstain, abstain for the Lord and give thanks to God.

For 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 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 one of us will be held accountable.

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But

he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (615)

There's a condo complex at the end of my road, New Lenox Road. It draws lots of people who aren't from here. I can tell by the license plates: New York, New Jersey, Tennessee, Florida. The driveway of the complex empties out near the stop light where traffic from New Lenox Road is sometimes backed up, especially in the summertime—two cars, three cars, sometimes more, those turning right waiting for there to be a break in the traffic on route seven or for the light to turn green, those turning left waiting for the light to turn green.

Which it always does in time. It's just a matter of a moment or a few.

About a month ago, someone who was stopped to exit left onto New Lenox Road from the condo complex watched as cars backed up at the light, two cars, three cars. I imagine the two people in that car were feeling themselves to be losing their rightful place in line so they decided to nose their car in.

The thing is, there wasn't a place in the lineup of stopped cars to nose into so the condo complex car ended up blocking the other lane of traffic, putting itself in harm's way. This is where cars come zooming off route seven.

Three cars back myself and fearing I'd be made to witness a t-bone collision, I was relieved that the first car to come along rounded the corner slowly and with easy sight of the situation, as did the second, and then the third—though any more of this would have cars backed up onto route seven, compounding the situation.

I have a friend who lives in New Jersey and has a summer home in Otis. She remarked once that people come to the country to feel less rushed and crushed, but then they bring that rush and crush with them. "Tragic, really," she joked.

"Everywhere you go," I said, "there you are."

Finally, the light turned green, and everyone was eased of mounting traffic, and mounting tension.

Or was that just me?

September has its consolations.

The churches of Rome had a brief time when social tension eased. It came with the Edict of Claudius which cleared the city of Jews, both traditional Jews and these new not-yet-called Jewish-Christians.

The year was 49, when the desire for revolt among some Jews against Rome continued to vex imperial power. This—the Jews, the Hebrews—was a small subculture in the Roman Empire, but they'd made themselves increasingly difficult over the last couple centuries. A revolt that took place two centuries prior left them feeling their power. The Maccabee brothers, zealots for the Law and the Temple, were victorious over Rome and even introduced a new holiday into this old, old faith. Hanukkah would celebrate their victory, eight nights of lights to remember their eight-day stand in the Temple against Rome.

And their fervor didn't die off with them. It was as ever-kindled as those storied oil lamps.

By the 1st century of the Common Era, emperors weren't as willing to see these as episodic uprisings but as an evergreen urge, always ready to strike up again. This much they could expect. This much they should always be ready for and even acting in prevention of. Mowing the grass, you might call it. Preemptive strikes, you might call them.

All very predictable.

Back and forth.

It's what empires do, what they *have* to do.

What no one saw coming, though, was this new sect among the Jews. These Jesus people: they were causing all sorts of disruption. Not that Rome could tell them apart.

And indeed, not seeming at first like a separate religion, the way of these Jesus people didn't even amount to a new direction. To those following in this way, this was a fulfillment of Jewish practice and promise. Far from being a departure, this was an arrival.

But to those among the Jews not following in the Jesus way, these new practices (or rather lack of practices) were a violation, and their peeling off others to join up in going loose on the Law was intolerable.

What made it worse still was the welcoming in of non-Jewish Jesus-followers, Gentiles who were joining up to follow in the way, who were indeed being encouraged to join up and follow in the way

What's with all the New Jersey plates?

All this allowance! It all involved jettisoning the very practices that had made the Jews a particular people in the first place, a people set apart, distinct from all the other nations of the world. Get rid of these practices—these dietary laws, these cleansing rites, these acts of sacrifice, all done in accordance with the Lord God who gave them the Law—and what have you got left? You might as well be anyone anywhere, in service of any god poised on any high peak.

Which apparently is what Jesus-followers wanted, to be all things to all people, welcoming of the whole world. Hence the Gentiles, the even dirty, disgusting Gentiles who did God knows what and ate God knows what and married God knows who and had sex with who knows who, right here in our midst.

But this family conflict that had the whole house in Judea cleaved in two was utterly unintelligible to Rome. All the emperor could see was that the Jews were trouble, just like always, and would have to go, expelled from Rome in 49, the Edict of Claudius clearing them out.

Which made the churches of Rome entirely Gentile gatherings.

Ahh. Eased of mounting tension.

Which shouldn't suggest there was among the relieved people of the churches of Rome uniformity of thinking and lifestyle. Gentiles weren't a people, they were merely not Jews. Other than that, who knows what they held in common, who knows what they were like?

But this new way wasn't really even about that. They weren't supposed to become more like one another and less like other people. They were just supposed to gather and hear something from scripture and then tell a Jesus story and then share a meal and even

sing a song or two. Then they were to take care of each other, make sure people had enough food and if they were sick would get some comfort.

It wasn't that hard, turns out, this new way—though sometimes a lack of challenge is the most stressful thing of all. Sometimes equality among all people is the most stressful social insistence to manage. But in most ways, things were clearly easier now than before, now that there wasn't the question of the Jewish law, what to do about its dictates that had been held for so long, what to do about its dietary laws that had given form to so much connection. What to do about circumcision, that ur-practice that really established who belonged and who didn't, a lifelong commitment you made early or not at all.

Ahh. Relieved of mounting tension.

But in the year 54, Claudius died, and along with him his edict.

Nero would now rule and he wasn't too worried about Jewish skirmishes. He'd let them back in, an early move that suggested he'd be less brutal in his reign.

Which wouldn't turn out to be the case.

Far from it.

But that's a story for another day.

As for now, the Roman churches became once again crowded with conflict as to how to live this faith in Jesus, Jesus who was himself a Jew and who called Jews to follow him and taught as a Jew—but who also didn't seem overly concerned with the letter of the Law, was rather quite happy to condense the ranging Law into two concise commandments. So which would it be, more law-abiding or more licensing? Which would the church be, ties that continue to bind tightly or some gracious, terrible allowance?

“Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.” So, both ways I guess?

We're in the portion of the Letter to the Romans that has Paul at his most practical. We've journeyed with him through this masterwork, the Letter to Romans, the first long portion of which is a building of the case, that there can be an interweaving of Jew and Gentile, that the church can be a broad collective of people following in their own way but all devoted in their praise of God.

Like, some will eat anything, while others will eat only vegetables. But neither shall hold in contempt the other, but should rather look for the fruits of such practices of devotion, which are giving thanks to God.

And some will honor the Sabbath, trusting this as a special day, while others won't pay attention to the Sabbath, trusting that every day is something to be equally grateful for. And neither group should hold in contempt the other, but should rather look for the fruits of such practices of devotion, which are offering praise to the Lord.

See, we shall none of us judge others who are different from us, not when a practice stems from devotion to God and bears fruit that is devotion to God because, as Paul trusts, "...those who eat, eat for the Lord, since they give thanks to God, while those who abstain, abstain for the Lord and give thanks to God."

Paul, of course, was uniquely positioned to straddle this line, and to trust the earnestness of those on both sides of it. He was himself a Jew, who then became a Pharisee, excelling in his obedience to the Law. But then he was confronted by the Risen Christ, confronted on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, and was moved to new sight having suffered temporary blindness. Therefore, as one who was himself earnest in his practice as a Jew, and equally earnest in his coming to trust in Jesus, he could credit both sides of this irrepressible divide with a heartfelt desire to do the will of God, this God who was apparently not going to settle on one way but was always to open new ways, perhaps ever and always to open new ways, so to reach the whole world, this God who would but encourage, as Paul did encourage the newly, once again confused Roman churches, to trust that "all [are] fully convinced in their own minds."

Which is quite the standard, right? Trust any who are fully convinced in their own minds.

Yes, how nice to trust such a standard, what comes of people who are fully convinced in each of their own minds.

But, how troubling, such a standard, what comes of people who are fully convinced in each of their own minds.

Because, turns out, we can become convinced of all sorts of things, each in our own minds.

Turns out, we can become convicted of even the least true things, making this, played out, quite (I'm sorry to have to say) an unstable standard.

Yeah, given the power of the human mind to justify itself, given the capacity of the human mind to feel so convinced of something that it feels like the truth, it feels to have come, so powerful, of God, Paul, in his admirable trust in the justification of God on the human mind and heart, pays not nearly enough heed to the capacity of the human mind to unseat God from the throne of justification, to rather seat ourselves on this throne of judgement, all done without any real consciousness of it. It feels true, therefore it must be true.

It just feels wrong to stab your baby with needles every few years, and the Polio virus is so very abstract. It just feels wrong that my car could have the power to melt ice caps and alter the gravitation poles of the earth so I don't really believe in climate change because the world just feels so much bigger than my car.

We are, these days, I'm still sorrier to have to day, living out this facile standard for discerning what's true. We are suffering it these days, with the internet being a realm in which more people spend more time than in any actual public square (whatever physical spaces might be out there that function as a public square). We are suffering the effects of this otherwise compassionate appeal that we each trust one another to discern for ourselves what's right, that we trust one another to discern what's true, what's godly, what's life-giving, and that we withhold judgment on others as they do this discerning, even though so often unstable, unmoored, and very much unto themselves.

Not that Paul could have foreseen it,
though perhaps Jesus could?

We're still amidst the community discourse, so called by biblical scholars. This portion of Matthew's gospel that has Jesus concerned for the church, concerned as no other gospel narrative remembers him to have been for the church, this rangy, unregulated gathering of people, all sorts of people, given no law to obey, no religious rites to engage, no orthodoxy to swear to, and no structure of authority to safeguard themselves other than that Jesus, the crucified one, is Lord: we're in the thick of it with him worrying about how this is going to go. When he's gone, having suffered the fate he'd begun to foretell he would

(betrayed into human hands, crucified and killed, and on the third day raised), how would his people continue on, their movement in the world, their relating with one another?

We've lately heard stories of a lost sheep, and the shepherd going off in search of that one. We've heard stories of a lost coin, and the woman simply tearing her house apart to search for it and find it. We've heard tell of how exactly to address when one member of the church gets done wrong by another. And now we hear this, about the fuel for its continued going, the thing that would make it all possible when you come right down to it: forgiveness. When things really hit the skids: forgiveness. When conflict arises, when a violation takes place leaving one member bruised by another, or *this* member offended by *that* one, and when all has been tried to make things right—a calling to account, an honest airing of what seems to have happened—the base of it all, its fundament, its final act, is forgiveness. When you can't get satisfaction, there is forgiveness. When you can't get things made right or old violations undone, there is forgiveness.

And not just seven times, but seventy-seven times, or even seventy times seven, which (seven being a divine number) suggests infinity. An infinite number of times we must forgive—for only this comes close to how we've been forgiven, how we've been utterly and undeservedly forgiven, our God as one who forgives.

A few months ago I attended a talk about the decline of religious affiliation in the United States and in most of the wealthy nations of the modern west. The speaker, someone from the Pew Research Center, asked those of us in attendance what we all thought might be contributing factors to this trend. There was an offering forth of all the usual answers: consumer capitalism, scientific advancement, scandals in the church discrediting the whole enterprise.

What I didn't say (because it would have been a bad look for a pastor to say it) was other people, the fact of other people. In every religious tradition of the global west, there is the insistence on other people. Certainly in congregationalism, there is the insistence on other people. We are to gather, indeed to congregate. We are to practice our religion together. We are to join, and to think about what it means to join. We are to take care of buildings, our public, material witness to the reality of God, and to decide upon practices and to manage assets and to choose hymns. We are to console each other in loss and to

rejoice for one another's blessings, and what counts as blessing to one might be annoying to another. Turns out, we are very difficult to be around—

but it is much more difficult to be cut off from one another. Even when our lives don't literally depend upon the endeavors of the group, even when we can buy our way out of hunger and need, even when I don't need you to trade me your pelt for my turnips, it's still much more difficult to do this alone. And we are simply driving ourselves crazy going it alone. We are driving ourselves mad trying to discern what's right and true all alone, influenced by things that show up on our screens and feeds but which do so beyond all accountability.

The challenge of the church is in being together. How we hold one another, how we regard one another, how we forgive one another and accept that we ourselves also rely on forgiveness.

I cleaned my garage this week. The floor of it was so accrued with grunge, I swept myself into some painful blisters. The friction of the work wore my thumbs raw. Good thing I have some balm to ease the burn.

So it is in Church. So it is with grace, forgiveness offered and received.

Thanks be to God.