

Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling 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 judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement 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.

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 in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

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 judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement 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 of us will be accountable to God.

Sermon

It's an odd passage that we read this week, about the food on our plate and the days of the week. But, if we look close, I think there's a lot of good news here.

Paul lays out some guidelines for the early church in Rome. You see, Paul didn't know the church that well, but he did know that they were struggling, like most churches in those early days, to follow God's call and bring together people from vastly different backgrounds. Different families, different cultures, different neighborhoods and income levels, even different faiths.

Because Christ had called every kind of Christian, to come and follow Him.

And though gathering all these different kinds of people around God's holy name might sound like a really great success story for the church. Those early churches were learning that it sure wasn't easy. They found that their different backgrounds led them to disagreements about all sorts of stuff. For them, it was about whether or not to eat meat. Or whether some days were more important than others. And, though the topics of discussion and disagreement may have

changed as the church has moved through the centuries - we certainly still have our disagreements.

And those disagreements can get pretty intense and pretty foundational. I'm sure all of us know some people who call themselves Christians, but when we hear what they believe, or how they live - we have to wonder how Christian they really are.

And Paul recognizes that, when he guides this church. He even takes up sides and lets them know that he thinks some of them are "strong Christians" and others are "weak Christians" depending on their choices and opinions on these issues.

But, despite his own opinions, Paul finds no excuse to exclude any of these Christians from the church's fellowship. He points them to the scriptures to remind them that we don't have that right, to judge someone else's faith, because ultimately, we are all accountable to God, and God alone.

And I think that's good news, because it sets us free. It sets us free from the responsibility of fixing those around us, or arguing them into our way of thinking. It sets us free from the worry about deciding who should be included and who should not. It even sets us free from our need to get it all perfect, to have all the right opinions and all the right actions.

And all that lies with us is to put those things into God's hands. Because God asks us to trust him once again.

- God asks us to trust that God knows what God is doing.
- That God had a reason for calling all those people that we don't understand or agree with.
- That God has space enough for every different kind of Christian, in God's compassion and grace
- And that God's love is strong enough, to work good through us and redeem all that we do, even when we get it wrong.

So, instead of worrying about the kind of food that is on our neighbors' plate, let us remember that what matters is who the work of the One they give thanks to before they eat.

Instead of trying to win the quarrel that holds us apart, let us look for the ways that we can grow together, toward the kingdom that God is building in our midst.

Instead of trying to draw lines between us and them - let us insist on loving one another, even when it's hard to find something loveable.

Instead of seeking ways to condemn each other - let us commit ourselves to the ways that God might be calling us to work together for something good, even when we disagree about everything else.

Because, if God can be the Lord of both the living and the dead:

- then God can certainly be lord of both the vegetarian and the carnivore

- God of those who celebrate on one day as opposed to another
- God of both the Jews and the Gentiles
- God of weak and strong
- And this God can be God of both us and them - no matter what our differences may be.

Because this is the good news, that God's grace is radical and transforming. God's creativity can build relationships where there is only hatred or misunderstanding or disdain. God's mercy can forgive all the ways that we have hurt each other. God's love can hold us together. And God's hope can pave a way for us to move forward, as one people formed of many, whose knees all bow down before the God of astonishing power and whose tongues all lift up praise to the God of overwhelming grace.

Amen.

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