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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19A)

September 14, 2014

Text: Romans 14:1–12

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today brings our brief journey through Romans to a conclusion. But our time has been fruitful and challenging. I've heard on more than one occasion that the sermons have been more pointed, more direct, and, I hope, more evangelically centered in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus: the Gospel being that extraordinarily good news that through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the world has been saved from eternal wrath and condemnation. And I think that we'll be challenged today as well. The Gospel permeates everything we do as Christians and as a Christian congregation.

Before we begin looking at Romans 14 in detail, it will be helpful to note that the apostle Paul did not establish the church at Rome. In fact, Paul had never visited them before writing the letter. Paul writes to them because he is an apostle of the Lord Jesus and has apostolic authority to speak to Christ's Church in each and every situation.

But the fact that Paul had never been to the Roman congregation necessarily limited his knowledge of the inner situation of the congregation's life. That means in this letter, Paul does not address specific concerns or problems. The letters to the Corinthian congregation serves as a striking contrast. Paul established that congregation during his 2nd missionary journey and was intimately and personally aware of all the congregation's problems, which were many and significant.

But it does appear the Romans had one burning issue creating strife within the congregation. Chapter 14 addresses this question. How are "the weak" and "the strong" to relate to each other? Which group is right and what should they do about it? The best we can determine is that "the weak" described a group within the congregation that refrained from eating meat and thought some days, either a day within the week or maybe certain days in the year, were more important than others. In contrast, "the strong" were a group within the congregation that thought these kinds of distinctions were absolutely unimportant. The two groups are describes in vs. 2, "One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only

vegetables” and then vs. 5, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.”

From our 21st century perspective, we might think this kind of situation to be bizarre at best and silly at worst. Who cares if someone eats meat or chooses to be vegetarian? Can that really be a Christian issue? And who cares what they think about certain days? Most people nowadays tend to like the weekend more than the rest of the week and NOT because of church on Sunday, let’s face it. TGIF has become a rather common expression not to mention the name of a national restaurant chain. An apostle of the Lord having to bother with such a thing seems, well bothersome.

Regarding meat, the concern was probably centered on whether or not it had been offered in sacrifice to the pagan idols of the Roman Empire. There were plenty of pagan temples in the city of Rome. Some Christians thought it sacrilege for Christian believers to eat food used in pagan worship. Other Christians thought it no big deal, meat is meat and those false gods aren’t real; Only God is real, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Maybe some modern equivalents would be how Christians should think about alcohol and tobacco, the lottery and other forms of gaming, certain forms of entertainment, one’s political affiliation – some Christians believe you must be a card-carrying Republican others say no way. Well, you get the point.

Try to imagine the impact on the Roman congregation if Paul came in and “laid down the law” so to speak. You “weak” Christians need to grow up and get over it. Or you “strong” Christians need to get over yourselves and your high-and-mighty-ways and start thinking about the needs of others. Such a tactic would have utterly destroyed the congregation and undermined the Gospel message that all Christians are saved through faith in Jesus without works of the law because of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Let’s see how the truth of the Gospel is at the heart of even this seemingly insignificant issue.

Look at vs. 1, “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.” The weak one is welcome in Christ’s Church. But he is not brought into the Church’s fellowship for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. A couple things must be said here...church membership should never be subject to arguments in general and certainly never over arguments about opinions. Notice Paul says opinions, not clear doctrine as taught in God’s Word. Truth can never be compromised for anyone, weak or strong. For example, we can never compromise the Biblical teachings of the Trinity, that Jesus is both God and man in one person, that

the salvation of the world is found only in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that Jesus is coming again to judge both the living and the dead, that eternity awaits every human being, and so forth.

When God's Word is silent on an issue, however, so the Church must be silent as well except to say that whatever we do, we do so in the Lord's name, for the extension of Christ's kingdom, and out of love for our neighbor. Christians can have all kinds of different opinions over a multitude of things. In fact, there can be quite a range of diversity in Christ's Church, not in doctrine, that must remain the same. But in opinions there must be room for all kinds of ideas.

But when those differences in opinions arise, we must treat our brothers and sisters in Christ with Christian love. Look at vs. 3, "Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains..." Let's stop there. Paul is speaking here to "the strong." They are the ones who see eating meat, probably sacrificed to pagan idols, as being no big deal. Paul warns them, they must not despise the weak. To despise or look down upon others for their silly ideas and scruples is an easy temptation to fall into when you are convinced that you have superior knowledge or wisdom. When you're strong in your opinions, it's quite easy to despise those who hold an opposing view. It's so clear? Why can't they see reason and drop such foolish notions? It's just meat! Pass the steak sauce.

Return back to vs. 3. Paul also speaks to "the weak", "and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats." They are the ones who see eating meat as a sacrilege. It's probably the minority opinion. To pass judgment on those whom you believe to be compromising the truth or being wishy-washy in an area of such monumental importance is an easy temptation for those who hold a less popular opinion. For them too it's so clear. That meat was sacrificed in devotion to a false god. Prayers to idols were offered over that meat. People will die in unbelief because of that false worship and here we are – the Christians, the ones who claim to know the true God of heaven and earth – eating it! It's as if we're saying it's all ok. Those compromising Christians! They'll have to answer for it before God. Pass the vegetables and the salt and pepper.

Who's right? Who's wrong? Paul, in effect, says it doesn't matter because both are opinions. Look at what Paul does say. Vs. 4, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand." Passing such judgments on the

intentions and sincerity of God's people over issues that God's Word does not address is an audacious and damaging sin. Who are you to pass judgment on God's servant? That's the Lord's business, not yours. Remember, we're talking about theological opinions not the clear teaching of Scripture.

I mentioned earlier that the Gospel would have been undermined and the congregation destroyed if Paul would have taken sides. Christianity is established on the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. The salvation of every man, woman, and child is founded upon the death and resurrection of Jesus who is believed, loved, and trusted by faith. "For the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...for the righteous shall live by faith" (Rom 1:16-17). If Paul would have taken sides, he would have been saying that a theological opinion negates faith in Christ. That's a terrifying idea. This time, my opinion may be correct. But what about the next one? If I hold a wrong theological opinion then maybe that one will destroy my faith.

No says Paul. Christ is the Lord of the Church. In Him, all Christians find their fulfillment and hope (vs. 7-9), "For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living." All those who live by faith in Jesus are Christians. They belong to Jesus whether they eat meat or not. We all live in the Lord and die in the Lord and are resurrected unto eternal life in the Lord Jesus.

Opinions come and go. But not Jesus. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. In Him we stand secure. In Jesus and the truth of His Gospel we are united together unto eternal life. We, Immanuel/St. John's Lutheran Church, are the fellowship of those saved by Jesus. Let us welcome all who come here in Jesus' name. For the righteous shall live by faith in the Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.