

A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 19A
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As I was preparing the sermon for this week, I was drawn to the reading from the letter of Paul to the church in Rome, first because of his snarky comments about vegetarians. I'm not as familiar with the epistles as I am with the gospels, and while it was clear that Paul was speaking to some kind of conflict about religious practice in the Christian community in Rome, I wasn't really sure of the particulars.

It turns out that others aren't sure either, and as I read over a dozen commentaries with conflicting points of view, I realized that this particular passage that we read today is at the heart of the whole reason Paul wrote this letter at all, and tells us a lot about how Christianity was shaped by conflict from its earliest days.

The letter to the Romans was written in about the year 57. Unlike many of Paul's letters, it was not written to a Christian community that Paul had started, or had ever visited. Paul is writing because he is planning a visit, and because he wants to ask the Roman Christians, one of the wealthier of the newly formed churches, to sponsor Paul's planned mission to Spain.

So Paul writes this long and theologically rich letter, with some of our favorite passages, including the one about love that gets read so often at weddings, as a way of introducing himself to the church in Rome.

And unlike the other letters of Paul where he addresses things that he has heard about the congregation, Paul is, in this letter, trying to address things he knows the congregation has heard about him. It's kind of like a cover letter to explain some things about his resumé he's pretty sure some of the Roman Christians won't like. For you see, there's a great big argument going on among the followers of Jesus during Paul's lifetime that we don't tend to notice, because by the time the gospels came to be written, the matter had already been settled, so scripture doesn't entirely reflect how big a battle it really was.

And the question that is being debated, for which Paul is the leader of one side of the argument, is how Christians should deal with the heritage, traditions, rules, and writings of Judaism.

Do you have to be Jewish to be Christian? If you are not Jewish by ancestry, does converting to Christianity mean complying with all of the purity codes and practices in the Hebrew Scriptures? Must Christian men be circumcised? Must Christians make annual pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem to make sacrificial offerings of animals on the Temple altar? Must Christians follow the dietary restrictions and purity codes of Leviticus and Deuteronomy that dictate even whom you may speak to? Must Christians observe the Sabbath every Saturday?

Paul, inspired by his liberating vision of Jesus and his subsequent study of the collected sayings of Jesus, says no to all of these questions. And as I said, these

questions were settled soon after the time that Paul is writing to the Roman church, partly by argument and agreement, and partly by the events of history, especially the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Roman Imperial authorities in the year 70, thirteen years after this letter.

But in the year 57, nothing is settled, and the Apostles, who, unlike Paul, had known Jesus when he was alive, and therefore claim to understand Jesus' intentions better than this upstart Paul, are mostly not on Paul's side. Indeed, Paul's fundraising trip to Rome will end up being postponed because Jesus' brother James, overseer of the church in Jerusalem, will summon Paul to Jerusalem to chastise and humiliate him right after the Letter to the Romans was written, and try, along with many of the other Apostles, to force Paul to give up his mission to the gentiles and let the Apostles bring the Good News only to the Jewish people. And Paul knows that the Roman Christians are having the same kind of arguments as he and the Apostles are, and that if he goes there, some of the leaders of the Roman Christians will have read some of the scathing things Paul said about James and Peter in his other letters, and will try to persuade the church not to listen to him or support him.

So, amid all the careful and poetic words about love and judgment and belief, in this particular passage, Paul jumps right into the controversy about his teachings, by addressing the conflict in the Roman Christian community about ritual practice.

It may seem odd to us that Paul's entry point into this argument is meat-eating versus vegetarianism, but this was one of the focal points of spiritual practice in his day. And the question wasn't one of our modern ones about health or animal cruelty or environmental protection, but about the relationship between Christians and pagan religious practices.

In cities throughout the Roman Empire, but especially in Rome, there were practitioners of hundreds of different religious cults, many from the Roman and Greek religions that you learned about in high school English and history classes, but also dozens of other religions, brought to the cities by captured peoples from all over, and tolerated by the Empire as long as the adherents were peaceful. And many of those cults, like the Jews, practiced animal sacrifice on their temple altars. And most of the meat from those sacrifices, ended up for sale in the marketplaces of the cities.

And indeed nearly all of the meat available for purchase in the cities was either sacrificed on those altars, or slaughtered with a prayer to the gods of whoever was doing the slaughtering. And the most religiously scrupulous members of the Christian Community, believing that they could not eat meat sacrificed to a pagan god without spiritually contaminating themselves, and unable to know what meat might be ritually undefiled, decided not to eat meat at all.

And these scrupulously religious Christians, surprisingly, are the ones that Paul calls spiritually weak.

This was where the modern commentaries I read got interesting, because some of them identified these spiritually weak, scrupulous vegetarians with devout Jews, following scriptural purity codes in a foreign land, far from the Temple, while other commentators thought the vegetarians were new converts, trying to distance themselves from the pagan religions they had abandoned in favor of Jesus.

Now Paul, despite the fact that he wants to be welcomed by the Roman Christians, does not back off from taking sides in this issue. It is clear that Paul believes that a strong faith allows you to abandon scrupulosity – that it is impossible for a Christian to be contaminated by exposure to pagan religious practices, or by eating meat sacrificed to gods that, after all, don't even exist.

But by not backing down from his opinion, which was already known to his opponents, and instead arguing that Christians do not judge those with whom they disagree, clever Paul is making a case for the vegetarian factor in the Roman church to welcome him.

Now that's a lot of history, and a lot of context for one short passage. But I think it's important to get the whole picture to see how rich an idea Paul is presenting to us: that living in relationship with Jesus, and embracing the life in God that Jesus

teaches, gives us a path to living in community with those with whom we disagree without abandoning our convictions.

Paul does not intend to give up teaching the Good News that has changed his life – that the transformative power of God’s love transcends former distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female; and that the Good News liberates everyone from a life of constant division and atonement. But he does not doubt the faith and commitment of those who disagree with him, and he counts on God, not himself, to be the judge of who is right.

To be sure, there is always a little bit of annoying self-righteousness in Paul’s arguments – we never wonder who Paul thinks is going to be judged correct by God. But Paul always recognizes that those on the other side have reasons for their convictions, and are also seeking to live godly lives and follow Jesus’ teaching and example. And he readily acknowledges that that matters more than who is right. He’s not going to stop arguing for his convictions, but he’s going to recognize not just that others have a right to their opinions, but that the faith that led them to those convictions is also holy, is also blessed, and may in the end prove to be right. This is a lesson and an example that we in the church have had a hard time remembering, throughout history and even up to this day. People of faith have often been hell-bent on not just arguing with their opponents, but judging them, condemning them, persecuting them, and even killing them, for the sake of faith.

We have, on so many occasions, been unable to see the faith, or maintain the ties of community with those with whom we disagree, that there are not only hundreds upon hundreds of Christian sects and denominations, there are also churches in the same denomination, sometimes only blocks apart, that have been formed and repopulated by arguments within the congregations about worship, or music, or leadership, or doctrine, or buildings, or money.

And Paul, in pleading his own case, offers us an alternative. Whether we sing hymns or we sing praise songs, we sing them to the Lord. Whether we worship solemnly or joyfully, we worship the same Lord. Whether we embrace change or hold fast to tradition, we embrace it or hold it to honor the Lord. Like Paul, we all have our own convictions about who has the right of it. But what we cannot do is judge one another, reject one another, turn our backs on one another, and claim that we are doing that to honor the Lord.

Amen.