

“In Any Event”
Romans 14:1-12; Psalm 114

Psalm 114:1-8

¹When Israel went out from Egypt—
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language—
²Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel his dominion.
³The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back.
⁴The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.
⁵Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?
⁶O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs?
⁷Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
⁸who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

Introduction

As John Akers reviewed for us last Wednesday evening:ⁱ

According to a first-century Roman historian named Suetonius, in the year 49, all the Jews in Rome, including the Christian Jews, had been expelled by Emperor Claudius. That meant that in the very young Christian church in Rome, only the ethnically Gentile, non-Jewish members of the Church remained.

Five years later, after Nero had become emperor, not that he was some wonderful human being, but he did allow the Jews back into Rome. Of course, that included the Jewish Christians, who rejoined the Gentile Christians in the Church.

But a lot happens in five years, and the two groups of Christians—the Gentiles who had stayed in Rome, and the Jews who had been sent away—had grown in very different directions during the time they were apart.

The Jewish Christians had maintained certain religious traditions they saw as non-negotiable, essential tenets. To them, surviving yet again in exile, it was more than just important; it had been crucial—religion-defining—that they maintain the “special days and kosher and purity rules”ⁱⁱ that had been an essential part of Judaism since long before Jesus.

Meanwhile, in those five years in cosmopolitan Rome, the Gentile Christians had come to see that the new life in Christ, which is to be lived in its fullest expression, brought with it freedom from customs and traditions that they regarded as superstitious.

For example, if you were a Christian, and you passed by a temple to some other supposed god, and they were serving meat and drink as a feast for that god (that you knew very well doesn't even exist), well, that would have been unusually great food—most people couldn't afford to have meat every day—and you don't ever want food to go to waste anyway.

So why not go in, be fed with whatever they're serving, and not worry about it? And this was not a rare occasion; there were regular opportunities for this kind of thing. And it's not like you're serving some other god, because, if you're Christian, you already know there *is* no other god. The main thing for them, theologically, was to live into the freedom that being a Christ-follower had brought to their lives.

They believed that that was a mature, strong expression of their faith in Jesus Christ. Consequently they came to believe that it was a sign of spiritual weakness on the part of those who needed the crutch of, say, keeping certain days holy—I mean, come on; isn't all time hallowed, since it is all given by God?—or the crutch of observing strict dietary rules.

Putting these two groups back together—each of whom knew beyond a shadow of a doubt they were correct—had obviously brought enormous tension to the already tense, victimized, sometimes terrorized Church in Rome.

This was the situation into which Paul was writing.

So, he wrote to the Church, both to the Gentile Christians who had been there, and to the Jewish Christians who were now returning to Rome and to the Church, bringing their different sets of ideas—some fundamental—about what it means to believe and practice Christianity and to live as a Christian.

The reading begins at Romans 14 verse 1, and Paul starts off by speaking directly to the Gentiles who are encountering the returning Jewish Christians.

Romans 14:1-12

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.

³Those 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. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment 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.

⁵Some 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.

⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.

Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God;

while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷We [Christians] do not live to ourselves [in other words, “for our own sake”]ⁱⁱⁱ, and we do not die to ourselves.

⁸If 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*.

⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your sibling? Or you, why do you despise your sibling? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

¹¹For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Prayer

God, you are the author of life and giver of salvation;
 the donor of our days, our generous benefactor;
 our home and our goal and our truth;
 our morning star and our evening bell.

In your gracious generosity, you give us minds
 that struggle and wrestle and occasionally comprehend.
 We mean to discern your truth, and maybe sometimes
 we are further from the mark than we think,
 and maybe sometimes we get closer than we realize.

In any event,
 Help us always to stand for what we know is good and right and true
 and, what is, above all, in accordance with your will.
 And help us, we humbly pray,
 that in our fervor to think, believe, say, and do what is right
 we may remember that others around us
 are also good, and kind, and intelligent, and faithful,
 and seek with the same purity to know how best to follow you.

When our interpretations differ
 and fundamental beliefs are found to be at odds with one another,
 please remind us, however you will,
 that You are the only ground on which we can stand—
 not our ethics or our theology or our reason or our passion,
 not conventional wisdom or philosophical sophistication
 or incontrovertible fact or convincing anecdotes,
 but only You. Amen.

The Sermon

It was just days after Trinity Sunday, and I was attending a conference in
 Minneapolis.

Trinity Sunday usually falls somewhere between mid-May and early June, since it
 comes on the Sunday following Pentecost, which is fifty days after Easter Sunday.

So I had just preached this lovely explanatory sermon on Trinity Sunday, and then
 I went to an annual event for preachers called the Festival of Homiletics.

Doesn't that sound festive? A *festival* of homiletics: the practice, art, craft and science of putting sermons together and preaching.

Some people struggle to endure listening to one sermon; I go to a *festival* of them.

The word “homiletics” actually derives^{iv} from an ancient Greek word that means “to converse with,” whose root is the word for a crowd of people or a throng; and which gave rise to another Greek word, *homilētikos*, which means “cordial.”

So “homiletics,” the art and practice of speech in the Christian context of worship, originates with ideas about people being together; about discourse, or conversation; and about cordiality.

So, I went to join 2400 other preachers at the Festival of Homiletics, and this was in 2008, during a bitter campaign season in which the phenomenon of having, for the first time, an African American being strongly considered for nomination to the presidency by one of the two major parties, was bringing out some real pain points in our nation's fabric: some plain ugliness, for sure; but also, pain points from all over the spectrum, which needed to be exposed, were being exposed.

And an excellent homiletician named Barbara Lundblad was speaking about the importance and, sometimes, the failure of preachers to address real issues in preaching, such as the complexities, and the difficulties and the genuine pain surrounding the topic of race in the United States.

She touched on how people sometimes walk out of our churches without really having heard any word at all, or had an opportunity to think and pray, and converse cordially, within a faith context, about crucial subjects like race in our country.

And, she said, part of the reason for that is that preachers often instead spend that time talking about things that are not relevant to people's lives, as many preachers did on Trinity Sunday—and these were her exact words—“giving answers to questions that nobody is asking.”

I am as amused by that observation as I am haunted and called to task by it.

I suppose she was encouraging us to ask ourselves the same thing that it seems like Paul is asking the Christians in Rome to consider.

Paul heard the controversies going on within the Church, a vulnerable church with a vulnerable congregation, and his letter urges the church to consider: what are we here for? What are we really talking about here?

What are we here to do?

What are we, the Church of Jesus Christ, really about?

Dietary practices?

I'm sure we have all known folks who go from church to church, joining and jumping in with both feet, until about a year or two into it, the preacher says something they disagree with, or someone in a class says something they don't like, or for whatever reason, it just becomes time to go, but they're not going to go quietly.

So after some kerfuffle of one kind or another, they up sticks and go to another church, where they jump in with both feet, become very active... After a couple of times around the merry-go-round, people in town already know what's going to happen in another year or so.

I am obligated to tell my favorite joke, which is the guy who's rescued from a deserted island where he's been living alone for several years. And the rescue ship is carrying him back to civilization, and one of the rescuers notices there are three huts that the guy had built on the island. And he says, "What were the huts for?"

And the guy says, "That one on the right is where I lived. The one next to it is where I go to church."

"And what's the third one?"

And the guy rolls his eyes and says, "Oh—that's where I *used* to go to church."

Sometimes people committed to following Jesus into the world have a sense of what that means for the way we are supposed to live our lives in faithfulness which is so strong that for anyone not to have the same sensibility means, in their mind, that that other person cannot be a Christian—or, at the very least, that they must not be doing it right.

When somebody says,

“I won’t be part of any church where people believe” such and such, or, “I won’t be part of any church where it’s acceptable for someone to do” such and such—even as an outcome of their deeply considered faith—it’s tempting just to say, “Well, all right.”

These are not holding facilities. You’re free to go as you please.

But Paul won’t have that. Paul doesn’t seem even to consider—it seems like it never even occurs to him—that you would cast out or let go a Christian from the Church. Not even the ones who think either that others ought to be cast out, or that maybe they themselves just ought not to go. Paul never kicks anybody out or invites them to leave. Instead, he urges them to figure out how to be the Church together—and when he does so, he always has them start with a long and unblinking look in the mirror.

Bear in mind that there were not denominations of Christianity in those days. The one Church was the only show in town for Christians.

So Paul said, to the Church in Rome struggling with different ideas about what is right and good and necessary:

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

“Some believe in eating whatever you want; some only eat certain things.

The ones 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.”

If the decisions they’ve made and the conclusions they’ve come to are rooted in faith, explored in a context where they are seriously asking, “What does God really want me to do?”,

then who are we to pass judgment, or look down on any of them?

Paul said, the ones who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; and those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

Some people judge one day to be better than another; others judge all days to be alike.

Fine! Just let all be fully convinced in their own minds.

They are not your enemy. And you are not better than they are. None of us is better than any other; and God is better than us all.

Why do you pass judgment on your sibling? Or why do you despise your sibling? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

People are dying out there. And people are living and dying with no idea who God is or whether God loves them or what God wants for their life and for all human life. And, in fact, there are Christian churches out there telling people that God does not love them, a glaring misrepresentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What are we about?

What questions are being addressed here?

Paul says, there are matters on which reasonable minds, people of good faith, people of good conscience, may disagree.

We are all still the Church. And when the Church finds itself divided, or paralyzed, or made irrelevant by disagreement over matters on which people may reasonably disagree, it is a sign that that community's insistence on only accepting people who think one thing is interfering with their ability to see and know and trust that *all of us are accountable to God*.

No matter how you vote,
or what you think,
or whom you love, or how you live,

If you are truly convinced that faithfulness to God leads you inexorably to your conclusions, no one in Christ's church is in a position to judge you.

And if your neighbors in church are convinced that faithfulness to God has led them inevitably to their conclusions, you are not in a position to despise them.

Just let all be fully convinced in their own minds.

Because, in any event, says Paul, each of us will be accountable *to God*.

Frederick Buechner said,

When Jesus comes along saying that the greatest command of all is to love God and to love our neighbor, he [is] asking us to pay attention. If we are to love God, we must first stop, look, and listen for [God] in what is happening around us and inside us. If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces, but the life behind and within their faces. Here it is love that is the frame we see them in.^v

Paul absolutely had firm ideas about what is good and right and true.

But above his own sense of the right way to practice Christianity, he knew that the Church is a precious and delicate gift, not to be tossed away by those who insist on things being their way or no way; not to be dismissed or abandoned even by those who know they are right and are horrified to see others in the Church who seem to be getting it so very wrong.

The Church, he saw, is the body of Christ, the place where we can engage in the practice of *homiletics*: a gathering together of a group, a crowd, a throng; for thoughtful discourse and conversation rooted in cordiality.

For the Christian family—this fractured, fighting, loving, diverse, dysfunctional family—Paul’s message remains.

Some Christians do things one way, some do them another way.

One person’s purity may be another person’s heresy.

Act in good faith, and be as true to God’s will as you know how to be—and trust your siblings to act in good faith and be as faithful to God’s will as they know how to be.

Because, “Who are you—who is any of us—to pass judgment?”

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. Whether we live or whether we die—

In any event, we are the Lord's.

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ⁱ John Akers, Montreat Wednesday lecture, Montreat, NC: September 13, 2017. See also "Romans: Introduction," HarperCollins Study Bible (1993), 2114.

ⁱⁱ Calvin J. Roetzel, *Romans: Special Reformation Edition* (Kerygma Resource Book. Pittsburgh, PA: Kerygma Program, 2016), 25.

ⁱⁱⁱ HarperCollins Study Bible, *n.* 2134.

^{iv} <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/homiletics>; <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/homily>; <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-homiletics-1690931>; all retrieved September 15, 2017. See esp. "homiletic" in the Oxford English Dictionary (1st ed.), Oxford University Press, 1933.

^v Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 16.