

## 17 September 2023, The 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 14:1-12 (Proper 19)

Today's 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading is intended to shake us up. Why do we so easily forget these basic principles about relating with other Christians? Paul's words are meant to be shocking: *Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.* We can be so eager to quarrel with, denounce, disparage, marginalize anyone not fitting into one's own tidy little churchy world. Paul gives two examples of secondary opinions: dietary practices and keeping holy days. Clearly Paul sees neither as of primary importance.

This raises the question, "What is of first importance?" In Romans chapter 10 (9, 11-13) he states, *...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved...for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek: the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved"*.

You noticed Paul's radical inclusion: **Everyone** who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved. "Jesus is Lord" is a statement of Christ's divinity and primacy, and our pledge to be always obedient to Christ. And we believe Jesus truly died and was truly raised from the dead, through whom we, too, have eternal life. These are the two Scriptural qualifiers, along with Baptism, for being a follower of Jesus. Again, why is it difficult to tolerate, let alone rejoice in, our differences? I think the primary reasons are fear and its first cousin insecurity. We live in a society of disintegrating faith communities in a larger context of many who reject the possibility of any power greater than themselves. One would think the world's hostility would draw people of faith together. It is the opposite. Many Christian denominations and parishes are intent on defining, defending, and insisting on a particular view of Christian belief and practice, quite content to endorse views that will surely result in more fragmentation in a quixotic search for a more 'correct,' 'pure' expression of Christianity. Lest you think I only have in mind conservatives and traditionalists, there are numbers of 'progressive' denominations, parishes, and people as seemingly intent on fracture and schism.

Another reason tolerance among Christians is difficult is, ironically, because of our long predisposition to be social creatures. This has served us well through the centuries fostering more secure protection from threats, greater productivity, and other benefits. Yet when the drive for social cooperation degenerates into a herd mentality our good predisposition for community becomes harmful. We can blindly follow the herd because it is easy, comfortable, and reassuring. We become blind or hostile to anything, anyone who deviates from the accepted norm, from our own practices, rejecting any innovation or change whose benefits are not apparent and immediate. The herd mentality may predispose us to the biggest, the seemingly most successful; after all, can all those people be wrong? Following the herd is seductive in a fragmenting society.

Paul asks the rhetorical question: *who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?* An updated version might be: *would you walk into someone else's business and discipline or fire the employees?* Of course, not. So why do we judge other Christians on matters that have no direct connection to the Lordship of Christ and his resurrection? Jesus is not only "Lord," Jesus is the only Lord, and we are all equal servants of the one Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul writes: *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...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* (cf. Ephesians 4:4ff). How can we not accept this Truth and live it. Our judgment is not all-seeing nor all-knowing, as is God's. Our judgment is not all-just and all-merciful. We have no status to judge others' salvation. We do not even belong to ourselves! We all belong to Christ. We rejoice when anyone proclaims by word and action "Jesus is Lord" and believes in his resurrection. Do not quarrel over secondary matters as important as they may be in the moment. Love Jesus, love the brothers and sisters, live peaceably with all, serve everyone for Jesus, remember who you are, always give thanks to God.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.