

Lectionary 23A
Romans 14:1-19

Pastor Wayne Peterson
September 4, 2011

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling 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 judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who 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.

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 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.

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 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. 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.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

The Andersons and the Smiths had lived in the same small community for many years. They were always cordial to one another, though they didn't usually socialize with one another. When their high-school-aged children, Joshua Smith and Kristi Anderson started dating, Mrs. Smith decided that the two families should get to know one another a little better, so she invited the Andersons over for dinner. The Andersons were delighted to have the invitation and very much looked forward to the evening.

As the date for the dinner approached, Josh and Kristi had several conversations and found that their families were very similar. They enjoyed the same leisure activities, liked the same foods, celebrated the same holidays. It looked like it was going to be a great evening until Josh mentioned that his family had the practice of eating with their forks in their left hand, European style. This was something that his mother's family had done for generations and he asked Kristi if she would mind explaining this to her parents and ask them to hold their forks in their left hand to eat.

Kristi didn't think that would be any problem and the next day mentioned it to her parents. Her mom felt that holding the fork in the left hand was a little odd, but she didn't mind doing it if it would please the Smiths by honoring their family tradition. But Kristi was surprised at her father's reaction. He was a little put out to think that they would ask him to hold the fork in his left hand. "It's not like I'm eating with my fingers. I'm using a fork, same as them. What difference does it make which hand I use?"

"Well, that's the point, daddy," said Kristi. "You know it doesn't matter which hand holds the fork. Both hands work equally well. But the Smith's tradition is to use the left hand, and though it seems insignificant to us, it's very important to them. You'll still eat just as well, so couldn't you please try using your left hand?"

Mr. Anderson replied, "But if I use my left hand, just to please them, they'll think that I'm agreeing with them that that is the proper way to eat, when I know in truth there is not just one proper way of eating. I think I should insist on holding the fork in my right hand to make clear my point that either hand is acceptable."

This conversation went on for three days, with neither Kristi nor her dad able to sway the other's opinion. In fact, the conversation was still continuing as the Anderson's car pulled into the Smith's driveway that evening. The Smiths welcomed the Andersons warmly and soon all were sitting around the dining room table. All joined hands as Mr. Smith said the table grace. The food was passed around and everyone filled their plates. Then Kristi nervously watched to see which hand her dad would use to pick up his fork...

I'm going to hit the "pause" button on this spellbinding story and leave you hanging in suspense for a couple of minutes while I try to explain how this story illustrates what Paul is talking about in Romans 14.

Paul is addressing a source of conflict within the Christian community – are there actions that are specifically Christian and non-Christian? Another way to ask the question is, can you gauge the genuineness and maturity of a person's Christian faith by his or her actions? In his letter to the Romans, Paul specifically addresses the questions of what food one should eat and what days should be considered holy days.

The food question centers on whether or not a Christian should eat meat. There are many among us today who choose to not eat meat because they think a vegetarian diet is a healthier diet or because they don't want to eat a fellow living creature. Those can be good reasons, but that's not the issue for Paul's community. The reason some Christians were choosing to not eat meat is that most meat sold in the markets came from animals that had been sacrificed to pagan gods. For them, eating this meat was a First Commandment issue – you shall have no other gods. Others rationalized that since there is only one God, the fact that someone else worshiped a false god should not be cause to let good meat go to waste. Besides, they have learned from the preaching of Paul and other missionaries that their righteousness, their standing with God, is based on what God has done for them in Jesus Christ, not on what they do or don't do, what they eat or don't eat. The group that refused to eat meat emphasized piety and doctrine. The group that ate meat emphasized their freedom in Christ. And the two groups self-righteously despised each other, thinking that they possessed the truth.

Paul also mentions a dispute about holy days – some judge one day to be better than another (perhaps the sabbath, the Jewish day of rest, or Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection on which the Christian community gathered). We could come up with a whole list of actions and behaviors that the Christian community has debated over the years. In my family's tradition of Scandinavian pietism, there were prohibitions against drinking alcohol, smoking, gambling, dancing, and going to movies. Congregations split over debates of whether or not to serve wine at communion, or to have guitars and drum sets at worship, or whether women can be pastors, or if bishops should be part of the historic episcopate.

I would argue that here in Romans 14, Paul does not simply give direction about the questions of eating meat and holy days, but instead gives us a method of addressing ethical and theological questions that can be applied in all situations where there is debate over proper Christian behavior.

Paul uses the terms “weak” and “strong” to describe the two groups, and it is perhaps surprising that he labels the group that feels they can do as they please as those who are “strong” in faith, while those “weak” in faith feel the need have a discipline of abstaining from certain food and drink. What I am going to say next is very important, so if you are daydreaming a bit, I want you to snap back to attention for thirty seconds. Although Paul uses the terms “strong” and “weak”, and we tend to think that being strong is preferable to being weak, Paul does not take sides on which position is more correct. He doesn't tell the “weak” group that abstains from eating meat that they are wrong and should go ahead and enjoy that filet mignon. What Paul does is tell both groups to not judge the other. The advice to both groups is the same: Respect the convictions of the other group.

Paul offers three reasons why condemning the other group is wrong. (Achte-meier, Romans, p. 216) In the first place, a Christian is a servant of God and thus a member of God's household. He says of servants in general, “It is before their own lord that they stand or fall.” So too, if God is willing to accept a person, whether “weak” or “strong” from our point of view, then no one else is in a position to condemn God's acceptance of that person.

Secondly, although Christians may have different practices, those practices come from a common root – the desire to honor God. One person may choose not to do some action because that’s how they think they best honor God. Another person may choose to do that very same action because that’s how they think they best honor God. Paul says we should not condemn those who prefer to honor God in a way different than we choose. Christian freedom extends to whatever may be done to honor God.

The third reason Paul gives why we should not condemn others for their lifestyle choices is the fact that it is God, and not us, who is the one who judges in such matters. To set ourselves up as judge is to put ourselves in the place of God. “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God,” says Paul. “Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.”

This emphasis on God’s judgment reminds us that Christian freedom is accompanied by responsibilities. God takes these responsibilities seriously, and we will be judged, but this is not a judgment by which one is deemed worthy of salvation or not. If our righteousness depended on God’s judgment of us, evaluating our worthiness of his love, that would contradict everything Paul had said earlier in the letter about God’s grace to undeserving, sinful humanity. But God will indeed judge the quality and responsibility of one’s Christian life, and it is therefore proper to emphasize the need for responsible action.

Paul calls for tolerance of those whose behavior and traditions are different than our own. This call for tolerance does not mean that once one is Christian, anything goes. There are indeed limits to what is permitted as Christian behavior. The criterion for discerning the limit of Christian freedom is the good of one’s neighbor. Martin Luther summed this up in his dialectic, or paradox, of Christian freedom: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subjection to none. At the same time, a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Our freedom always stands in tension with our responsibility to our neighbor, and both are subject to the expectation that our actions honor God.

Another phrase that tries to encapsulate this concept is “bound conscience”. You may have heard this phrase in regard to interpreting the ELCA Sexuality Statement from two years ago. Dr. Timothy Wengert, a church historian and Reformation scholar at our seminary in Philadelphia, says, “Respect for the bound conscience does not mean that one can simply declare one’s conscience to be bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture, and then make everybody else deal with it. Respecting bound conscience is not a form of selfishness or an excuse to sin. Instead, it means that the very people who hold different, opposing viewpoints on a particular moral issue based upon their understanding of Scripture, tradition and reason must recognize the bound conscience of the other, of their neighbor who disagrees with them, and then work in such ways as not to cause that other person to reject the faith and fellowship in Word and Sacrament.”

Paul does not use the term “bound conscience,” but this is what he is describing here in Romans 14 – when we have differences of opinion with other Christians about matters of ethics or theology, let us respect the convictions of our brothers and sisters in Christ and not demand a uniformity that will undermine our unity in Christ.

Now I'll undo the "pause" button and go back to my silly story about the forks. Kristi wanted her dad to use the fork in his left hand because that was the tradition of the Smiths and since he agreed it didn't matter which hand to use, it should be no big deal. But Mr. Anderson resisted, thinking that by accepting the Smiths' tradition, it would give the appearance that he accepted the practice of holding the fork in the left hand as the best tradition. He wanted to eat with them, but he was wary of doing it on their terms and thereby losing the freedom to eat with whichever hand he wished.

Well, Kristi watched as her father pick up his fork with his left hand and switched it over to his right...and then again back to his left, at which point he cut a big piece of ham and placed it in his mouth as he winked and smiled at her.

I think Paul would have been pleased.