

Sermon on Romans 14:1-12 – Living peaceably in disagreement

God's grace and peace to you from Christ our Lord. Amen.

Before we get into the assigned text for today's lesson from Romans 14, I thought I'd do a quick recap of what we've heard so far from Paul's letter to Rome. And the reason why I'm doing this, and have done it before, is because one of the best ways to learn something is to hear about it again and again so that it sticks in our hearts and minds. There's a saying that says you need to hear and say someone's name a few times before it sticks, and the same can apply to learning what God wants to teach us in Scripture. So here we go:

Romans 6 – Baptism – The definitive event in our lives when God claims us as his own and where we die to sin, buried with Christ, and live to God.

Romans 7 – Taught us about God's law – that it is holy, righteous and good, but it also demands perfect obedience which no one can fulfill, save one – Jesus Christ who fulfilled God's law for us.

Romans 8 – A flurry of promises for us to hold tightly onto – No condemnation, the promise of God Himself, the Holy Spirit, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

Romans 9, 10, & 11 – Sums up Paul's difficulty he had with his Jewish brothers and sisters who were not receiving and believing in their Messiah. Also, the power and promise of predestination. These chapters teach us about God's unshakeable will to save and redeem all people, but also how God does something strange, something "alien," to consign some to disobedience so that others may receive God's mercy.

Romans 12 – Going from doctrine to living as Christians in the world. We are to be "a living sacrifice" for our neighbor's sake, because God doesn't need our good works but our neighbor does. And we serve our neighbor, whoever that may be, not because we have to, but because we want to – we live our lives of faith in response to what God has already graciously done everything for us, namely by sending his Son to die for our sin and to be raised for our justification, to make us right with God.

Romans 13 – Talked about living as good Christian citizens but also talked about loving our neighbors as ourselves – Love is the summation of God's law. And we love because God first loved us (1 John 4). And Paul also teaches us to never neglect the fact that we've been baptized – each and every day we are to "put on Christ" for the sake of our neighbor.

And that brings us to our present chapter. In chapter 14 Paul writes about the importance of mutual understanding in God's church. As we all know well, not everyone agrees on everything.

This is just simply how things are. Husband and wives often get in arguments about the most petty things – who does the dishes after supper? Do I really have to put the toilet seat down every time? And so on. However, those who belong to Jesus Christ, you who belong to Jesus Christ and are a member of the body of Christ are to deal with each other lovingly in the midst of differences. Differences in opinion are to be tolerated in God's church because all serve and

understand their service to God in different ways. For example, in this chapter Paul mentions a couple things that might seem pretty trivial to us – Christians living as vegetarians and others eating whatever they want, Christians who celebrate certain days or hold certain days in reverence while others think that all days are holy in God’s sight. Basically, in this passage Paul is calling for everyone to mutually understand one another even if they don’t agree on certain matters. But not only that, he puts all the disagreements in the bigger picture of God.

An example of this that comes to mind was during the time of the Reformation. After Reformation was kicked into high gear, certain controversies crept into the church. Some pastors wanted to get rid of everything that reminded them of the Roman church; pictures in the sanctuary, elevating the host, wearing vestments during worship, etc. Other pastors, however, appreciated some of those things that had been handed down throughout the ages. If I were to put it in more modern terms, some people wanted to keep the traditional forms of worship while others wanted to be more “contemporary.” The fancy name of this was the “Adiaphoristic controversy” – adiaphora, a Latin word, meaning “indifferent.” So Luther and the other reformers went to texts like this one in Romans 14 and said – If some of God’s people want to worship the traditional way, let them. If others want to worship in another way, let them. Worship doesn’t need to look the same at all times in all places. However, what was not tolerated was different doctrine. External things – how we worship, what kind of food someone wants to eat, what days they want to celebrate – everyone understand these things differently and to each his own as long they are doing it in honor of the Lord (Rom. 14:6). However, when it comes to doctrine, what the God teaches us in Scripture, difference in opinion cannot be

tolerated because God's word is clear and the Gospel cannot be compromised – “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”

So what does this text speak to us today? This text can speak volumes to us if we let it. At the beginning of this text Paul talks about those who are weak in faith and those who are strong in faith. This is all well and good. In every church there are those who are weak in faith and those who are strong in faith. The problem isn't that there are those who are weak or strong, the problem, perhaps especially today, is that everyone thinks that they are the “strong” ones. If we look at politics today we get a good sense of that – Certain Democrats are convinced that they are right about everything and if you don't agree with them then you are some backwater, unrefined, country bumpkin. On the other hand, certain Republicans think that they are right about everything and if you don't agree with them on everything then you are a soft, bleeding-heart liberal.

Now I ask, is that what the church is about? Being at each other's necks over often times the most trivial things? Or is the church, the body of Christ, called to look and be different than that? If we listen to the words of Paul in this chapter, if we listen to the words of Jesus Christ from our reading from Matthew, we see that the answer is yes – the church is and does look different than.

I mentioned at earlier that in this chapter Paul puts things in their proper perspective. It is inevitable that God's children won't agree always, especially on trivial matters. But Paul makes a powerful move. In verses 7-9 he 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." When Paul writes this verse it's like he's saying: "Look. Some of you are arguing and disagreeing about some of the most ridiculous things. Put things in proper perspective. If someone wants to be a vegetarian – let them, but let them do for the sake of glorying God, don't you carnivores look down on them. If someone is all about eating burgers and steaks – let them, but let them do it thanking God for the food, don't you herbivores look down on them for eating what they eat. For those of you lean to the left on the political spectrum, do it in honor of the Lord and understand and respect where your brothers and sisters in Christ are coming from. For those of you that lean to the right on the political spectrum, do it in honor of the Lord and understand and respect where your brothers and sisters in Christ are coming from. None of you have the answers to everything. But you must respect and love one another because you all belong to Jesus Christ and you all belong to his church. Jesus is your Lord now, in whatever you do to honor Him and Jesus is your Lord still when you're dead and six feet under."

It's sad to say that God's children bicker and banter about insignificant, adiaphora, things. However, it's even sadder when God's children won't even try to understand one another. Because even if something is insignificant, adiaphora, to you or to me, it is a very big deal to someone else. And if you or I think that something is so important, someone else may very well think that it isn't.

If I were to sum up these 12 verses it would be this: If you are weak in faith or strong in faith, when you are in the midst of a disagreement, know that the person you're disagreeing with is someone that Christ died for too. For just as surely as the Father sent his Son to die for you, so did he send his Son to die for that person too. And just as surely as the person you're disagreeing with will stand before the judgment seat of God, so too will you. As Paul says at the end of this passage: "Each of us will be accountable to God."