

Theme: Seeing Each Other as Precious to God - Romans 14:1-12

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who has brought us together”. Amen

In the three readings for today we found an important question, and it is: “How shall we treat each other?” Joseph in our first lesson had a chance to punish his brothers who sold him into slavery by his jealous brothers; but instead of doing this, he looked at his brothers as precious to God. Rather than destroy them and their children, he actively worked to preserve their lives. In our Gospel lesson, Peter asked the Lord “how often he should forgive his brother.” “Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” In other words: we should always forgive.

In our text for today, Paul exhorts the congregation in Rome to serve each other in love and respect. That is how we are to treat one another: we are to look at one another as precious to God—so precious that He would send His begotten Son to save them. All, whom you meet, interact with, who sin against you, or whom you sin against, are those whom Jesus regards so highly that He has died to redeem them.

No doubt there will still be disagreements and differences among Christians. St. Paul speaks of this in our text for today. The Romans had a big collection of gods, and they offered many animal sacrifices to their various idols; then, the meat went to the marketplace for sale. This is where the problem started.

Some Christians simply went and bought the meat and ate it for dinner. But others thought: “if that ox had been sacrificed to a false god, then that meat had been used in service to this false god.” And because they did not want to have any part of a false god, they thought they would sin if they ate the meat. They, instead, lived on vegetables. This issue was causing problems among the Christians in Rome.

Just imagine that our congregation plan a Voters Assembly, and we discuss ahead of time what to bring for lunch during that meeting. Some members say, “We will eat hotdogs, and hamburgers at lunch”. But other members say, “No. We will eat only vegetables and fruit.”

The discussion goes on and on and no agreement is reached. What to do in this situation? Who of the groups are right?

Paul in our text solved the problem in Roma inspired by the Holy Spirit. Since idols are false gods that have no existence, there was nothing special or especially wrong with the meat. It was perfectly all right to eat the meat that was once sacrificed to idols. Does this mean that the meat-eaters are victorious? Barely. Instead, Paul repeated the lesson learned by Peter and Joseph's brothers. The Roman Christians were to regard each other not as two enemies groups of herbivores and omnivores, but one body of believers for whom Christ had died. He says in v. 3 and 4:

"Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:3-4).

God had welcomed the one strong enough in faith to eat that meat, as well the one who was weak in faith and stuck with vegetables. Christ had died for both, and both by God-given faith were in that congregation. The cross of Christ—His death and resurrection—set the stage for them to serve each other, not force others to submit to their viewpoint and opinion. That is how it was to be. There were certainly non-negotiable. No matter what, the Romans were to hold fast to God's Law - the Ten Commandments, which declare that sin is sin and sinners need to repent.

They would still proclaim Christ crucified, for to stop doing so would be to abandon the Gospel. They would still point people to the Lord's Word and Sacraments, because that is where forgiveness is given out. Paul was not talking about these clear doctrines of Scripture. Both the vegetarians and meat-eaters already believed these teachings, because they were in the congregation. But when it came to food, God did not say, "you shall eat meat" or "you should not eat meat," or "you shall eat vegetables" or "you shall not eat vegetables."

The Christians were free to choose, even if their choices sometimes sprang from weak faith. What they were not free to do was to assert they were superior for their choice, or—worse: force their preference on others.

So it is with the Church and her congregations today. Where God says “You shall” and “You shall not,” and where His Word is clear on what we are to believe and do, we follow that clear Word. Where God gives us freedom to do one thing or another; we have freedom. However, we are never free to force our opinions and preferences on another who might be weaker in faith. We do not view each other as stepping stones for our gain. We see each other as those redeemed by Christ, and that should always be the first factor in how we treat one another.

Compulsion and shows of force are the way of the world. You have your opinion, you argue your opinion; you gather enough support among followers to get your opinion approved. You gather enough power to get your way. That’s how it works in boardrooms, neighbourhood associations and international diplomacy. But as Jesus said to His disciples, “It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

In your Christian freedom, you are free to serve those around you; and that will sometimes mean giving up your comfort and ways in respect to one who is weaker, even if your way is right, as long as the other’s is not wrong. By definition, (majority rule) forces a decision on the minority; but Scripture commands a higher standard for the Church. Those in the minority are not losers on the other side: they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, who has died for us all.

No doubt you as a congregation had taken many decisions in the past, and for sure we will make other decisions in the future. But, keep in mind that what is important is how we treat each other when we discuss those issues concerning the church. There will be different opinions among us, perhaps a few times our voices will be raised, and convictions

will be held passionately. However, as brothers and sisters in Christ, those decisions will be made with the recognition that we are the body of Christ in this place. When issues regarding the church come up for discussion—whether in your personal thoughts, over coffee or in a formal meeting, we have a basis for how to proceed. If the matter is clearly decided by Scripture, then we know what to do: We obey the Lord’s Word.

If one decision clearly keeps the focus on Christ and Him crucified, and the other less so, then we know what to do: We keep the focus on Jesus Christ. If the matter is one of Christian freedom, where Christians are free to disagree, then the considerations multiply: but we deal with one another from love, not power. We clearly want to hear one another and gather as much intelligent input as we can. We do not settle for “What is best for me?”, but “What is best for the body of Christ?” Each of us should ask, “Does my opinion, even if it is right, hurt those who are weak in faith and troubled in conscience?” Each of us should also ask, “Do I object to the other idea because I am weak in faith or only because I do not like it?”

St. Paul warns us not to use weakness as an excuse to get our way, as a way to get power over others. He says: “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.” Furthermore, it is good, always, to strive for consensus, rather than a 51% majority, in a congregation: in some decisions, even when a majority favours, it is better to wait until more are agreed.

Unless there is an emergency or pressing time limit, many matters of Christian freedom allow for all sorts of time to get things done. Waiting may annoy when you want to charge ahead, but patience is a virtue. Let all of our interaction with one another be guided by this: we are the body of Christ in this place. As our text says, “none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself.” We are in this together because we are redeemed in Christ.

While there are disagreements in families along the way, the big battle has been settled. As the body of Christ, this is what St. Paul declares of you throughout the text: Christ is

your Master, and it is before your Master that you stand or fall. But this is already done: you stand.

You stand because your status before your Master is not determined by how well you serve Him or what decisions you make. You stand before Christ because Christ has already died for all the sins that would leave you fallen; and because He gives that grace to you; you stand with Him forever.

The Lord delights in what you do as His children in all aspects of your Christian freedom. Whether you eat meat or vegetables, you are His beloved child. Whether you celebrate this day as Pentecost 13 or Holy Cross Day, you are His beloved child. As you go about your days, the Lord delights in what you do—not because you are earning His favor, but because you have already got it. You have already got God’s favor for Jesus’ sake—that’s why Christian freedom is truly free.

Throughout our text St. Paul reminds what lies behind all decisions and discussions that take place among God’s people: the Savior and His sacrifice for you. In all that we do as a congregation, we are the body of Christ, redeemed by His blood. As it is true for all of those around you, it is true of you: first and foremost, above all, O believers, you are forgiven for all of your sins. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen