

Sermon – Sept. 17, 2017 – “We Are Accountable to God Alone” – Rev. Diane Ellis



Romans 14: 1-12

Welcome 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 do not live to ourselves, 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 brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? 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.

In today's Scripture reading, we find Paul writing to urge the people in the church in Rome to stop judging each other. Some issues in Rome had become so serious that believers refused to have fellowship with those who were opponents. This happens in churches as well as in businesses, families, schools and other places where we humans find ourselves in community with others.

In this church we can think of issues that have served to divide us in the past, can't we? There have been times when we have felt those holding different opinions than ours were “weak in faith” as Paul calls them. And we have refused to have fellowship with those who think differently from the way we do. What do you think God thinks when we leave a church because we disagree with others' opinions?

We can think of lots of controversies which have divided our churches including homosexuality, abortion, evolution, ordination of women, authority of Scripture, Eucharist and what the church needs in a minister.

In this passage Paul is not suggesting that people stop advocating for their positions on certain topics of importance to them. He is, rather, concerned about the spirit in which Christians disagree. He holds a vision for us in which we can love our enemies, those we passionately disagree with. What do you think of that vision? Do you think it is possible?

When we stop seeing those with different views as children of God and see them instead as wrong-headed sinners, we can easily slip into comfortable feelings of self-righteousness that further divide us. Paul is a living witness to what a difference the power of grace can make.

Without grace, he would still have been Saul, persecutor of Christians, someone on the very opposite side of righteousness. Are we tempted at times to classify those who disagree with us on issues as people like Saul? Sinners who are beyond redemption, who are just wrong and not worth saving because of how wrong they are?

Often our opinions are formed because we are moved by love and a concern for every other as a child of God. And grace allows us to see that the other side may also be moved by love and concern for others. As Paul points out “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.”

As believers we are called to live in community, not just with those who agree with us, but with other believers who challenge us and push us out of our comfort zones. They provide us with the opportunity to listen and learn, to see things differently, if we are open to genuine, authentic conversation. Paul urges us to invite into the community those we believe are weak in faith, those who see things from a different perspective. We are called to embrace all people as equals in Christ. Can you do this?

If you disagree with others about how we should receive recognition as a church for our outreach efforts, can you embrace with love those who see things differently than you do? If you disagree on where the flowers should go in the sanctuary, can you embrace with love those who don’t agree with your view? If you disagree passionately with someone on politics, can you bring yourself to see them as children of God, as equally deserving of God’s love and your acceptance?

Do you think fundamentalists are the strong ones of faith because they believe the right way is to rely solely on texts of the Bible interpreted literally? Or do you think they are the weak ones and that the strong ones are the progressives whose right way is a belief that God is being revealed through the Bible in new ways to each generation? Do we get to decide which have strong faith and which have weak faith?

Our strength as Christians comes not from how long we have been members or how much we give to the church, not from how much Bible we know, or how often we serve in various posts. It comes from the way in which our beliefs guide our actions each day. That’s where our strength comes from. Do our actions match our words? Do we love one another as God calls us to, or are those just words we say as part of our faith tradition? Do we walk our talk? Have you ever pointed out a weakness to one you feel is not as strong in faith as you are? Do you realize that judgment is a testimony to your own spiritual weakness?

In the Gospel of Matthew we find Jesus telling us not to judge so that we may not be judged. He asks us why do we see the speck of sawdust in our brother’s eye and pay no attention to the log in our own eye? He suggests that we concern ourselves with removing the log from our own eye before passing judgment on another. I know those are harsh words, but God is very clear with us.

God doesn’t say love those who think like you do. God doesn’t say you should judge others. God doesn’t say that some Christians are better than others. God calls us all children, beloved, created

in the divine image. We are not divided up into groups based on our opinions, with some of us considered right and others wrong.

When we come together, do we celebrate our differences? Do we embrace our diversity? Or have we lost the joy of being in Christian community? Are we unhappy to be around others who don't share our opinions but still consider themselves Christian? Are we tempted to judge them as "less than" we are?

Where do you find joy in this particular community of believers? What feeds your soul when you are fully present in this family of Christ? Have you lost the joy of being together with other Christians who think differently about some things and are still your brothers and sisters in Christ? Think about that a minute. How do you feel about the others in this church who disagree with you on various issues? Can you extend your love and kindness to them as you do to those who agree with you?

Do you welcome everyone into the body of Christ, regardless of where they are on their faith journey? Each Sunday morning we begin our service by declaring that all are welcome in this church, regardless of who they are or where they are on their journey. Do we really live those words with each other?

What do you think makes a strong Christian? What do you think makes a person weak in faith? Think for a minute of one characteristic that you believe demonstrates strong faith and another characteristic that you believe demonstrates weak faith. How comfortable are you with these classifications? Do you feel comfortable making these judgments? The back of your bulletin has some additional ways to look at how our beliefs and actions reflect the strength of our faith.

So, what happens when we no longer respect and listen to those with opinions that differ from ours? What happens when we stop talking to each other? When we begin to demonize those who think differently from us? As Christians we are accountable to each other and to God.

Being a Christian is not an easy task. We go down a road that will challenge us and call us to be our best selves, to demonstrate the divine image in which we were all created. It is a path we have chosen and God doesn't leave us alone to fend for ourselves on that path. God provides us with on-going guidance, support and love. Our job is to stay open to the truth about our actions and how well or poorly they demonstrate the strength of our faith.

And I want to end with an incident that happened to me this week in which I chose to judge, to see another as an adversary, an enemy. This is a path we will never skip down easily. Just when we think we have it all together, we find we don't. But it is such a worthwhile path to be on. I know I wouldn't choose any other.

I registered for a class this semester at Colgate Rochester Crozer and asked the admissions person if I needed anything in order to check out a book from the seminary library. I didn't have any student ID as I am auditing the class. She said no, I didn't need anything, and if there was a problem to have them call her.

So I went to the library Monday to do some of the reading homework in a reserve book. I said to the librarian that I wanted to check out a book. She asked if I had a library card and I said no, that the admissions person told me I didn't need anything to check out a book and to call her if there was any problem.

Well the librarian was deeply affronted. She said to me a number of times "this is a library" and "you need a library card, this is a library." I asked her to call the admissions person but of course, just my luck, she was at lunch. So our conversation ended with her continuing to tell me this is a library and you need a library card. So I left and didn't get to do the homework I had planned on doing before the class.

I was very upset, feeling abused and treated unfairly. I saw the librarian as the enemy, someone out to make life difficult for me. I judged her and put her in the group of sinners, people who are not doing things the right way. I knew this was not right, but have you had times when your feelings are so strong that you have trouble reigning them in to be what is right? Well that was a time for me.

It was a good personal reminder for me of how easy it is to push others out of the family of God because we righteously judge them to be wrong. It is especially easy when you are feeling threatened by those others, when you feel hurt and afraid. Fear can bring up all kinds of nasty feelings and actions for us, can't it?

So I have been working this week on not judging the librarian, of loving her as another child of God, created in the divine image and deserving of love from God and from me. It has been a struggle but fortunately God doesn't leave us to do it on our own.

Now as you go into a period of decision-making about calling a new spiritual leader, there will be strong feelings and beliefs about what you think is best for this church. You won't all agree on the best path for the future, because you are all different. Your life experiences have shaped you in a unique way.

However, that doesn't mean you can't all work together for the good of the church. Focus on the values you share in common, your faith in a loving God, and your desire to follow the way that Jesus showed us. During this time of discernment I encourage you to keep Paul's words fresh in your mind that no matter what we believe, we all belong to God. Let it be so.