

Nonjudgmental Faith  
Romans 14:1–12  
Sunday, September 13, 2020

I knew a person years ago who *did not like* doing communion by intinction (when we walk forward and dip a piece of bread into the cup). They only wanted to receive communion by passing the trays. And they were not *quiet* about this preference. Every month, they would call the church and ask, “How are we doing communion this month?” If we said, “By passing the trays,” they would say, “I’ll see you on Sunday.” If we said, “By intinction,” they would scoff and say, “Well, I won’t be there.”

When I found out about this, I felt the need as this person’s pastor to find out what was going on there. So we had some conversations about it. I would say, “What is it that you don’t like this? Why do you feel so strongly about it?” And this person would say, “Intinction is just not Presbyterian. It’s too ‘Catholic.’” I would say, “Even if that was the case, what’s wrong with that? Being Catholic isn’t a *bad* thing.” And they said, “But we’re *Presbyterian!*” I would say, “There are *lots* of Presbyterian churches that have communion by intinction,” and this person would say, “Which ones,” so I would name the ones I knew of. They would say, “Well, I still don’t think it’s right.” At this point I would sometimes get a little too smart for my own good and say, “How do you think *Jesus* shared communion with his disciples? He didn’t pass trays. Scripture says he dipped the bread in the cup.” And this person would say, “Yeah, and he stayed seated while he did it!” I couldn’t argue with that.

We went around and around like this, over and over again. This person felt so strongly about it that they weren’t willing to give in, but I kept pursuing it because honestly I wanted to help them see that this was okay so that they could be included with the whole body and maybe even discover a new way of connecting with God. But there came a point when I realized, “You know

what? It doesn't matter. This person is receiving communion the *way* they feel called to, *when* they feel called to. Maybe my only role here is not to *convince* them but to meet them in that moment and celebrate it with them." So that's what I started doing. Each month before we had communion (by passing the trays), I would find this person before worship and say, "I am so glad that you're here today. I'm really looking forward to sharing communion with you." My calling was to love this person where they were, not make them go where I thought they should be.

After all, we weren't talking about *whether* we should have communion. We were just talking about *how* we do it, and that's something that scripture doesn't give us specific direction on. It's like with baptism. Some Christians think only adults should be baptized, while some think it's open to infants, too. Some churches only sprinkle water, while some pour it from a pitcher or fully immerse in a body of water. We aren't talking about *whether* we should baptize, we're just talking about *how* we do it, and that's something that scripture doesn't give us specific direction on. Or the conversations about contemporary and traditional worship – some people want to sing contemporary Christian songs with guitars and drums, while others want hymns on a piano or organ. We aren't talking about *whether* we should praise God through song – we all agree that we should – we're just talking about *how* we do it, and that's something scripture doesn't give us specific direction on.

Any time you get a group of people together to live their lives and practice their faith together, you're going to get a multitude of differing opinions on what that should look like. And too many times in churches, these differing opinions can turn into fierce debates that result in people getting angry or hurt and leaving. We are *going* to have differences of opinion as a church. Let's just start there. You are in this community of faith with people who have vastly different

worldviews, backgrounds, and experiences than you do. It is unavoidable. How do we live life together, as one whole body, with people with whom we disagree? We talked about that question last week in terms of *politics*. We're going to talk about it this week in terms of *theology*. There are some people here who grew up in Presbyterian churches, some in Baptist churches, some in Methodist or Lutheran or Episcopal churches, some in Catholic churches, some in no church at all. How do we live life together as one body in Christ? Maybe a more pointed question is, "How do I coexist with this person who I think is totally wrong in their approach to faith? This person who reads the Bible totally different than I do, and it leads them to hold beliefs that are completely opposite mine?"

Last week I talked about how we're going to spend the next few weeks looking at Paul's letters to the Romans and the Philippians, and there is a quote that is going to tie all of these sermons together. It's by a theologian named Israel Kamudzandu, and he says, "The main challenge of our time is to live with a transformed mind that is open to the other and leads to inner transformation. It is crucial for Christians to consider each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life, and to live each day beyond the self." So for us, this person who believes different things and practices their faith differently than I do *is my loving partner on the journey of life*. And *on this journey*, we are called to *love them where they are*, not make them go where we think they should be.

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This is what Paul is touching on in chapter 14. Paul talks here about how some Christians believe in eating anything, while some eat only vegetables, and how some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Now, one of the challenges here is that we don't know exactly what Paul is talking about. He doesn't explain it. We don't know if these are specific problems in the Roman church, or if he's using generic examples. He *might* be

talking about differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians, with Jewish Christians still trying to keep laws pertaining to food and sabbath. He *might* be talking about how, in Roman culture, the meat that was sold in the marketplaces had been sacrificed to pagan gods, and so some Christians felt it was wrong to *eat* that meat. They abstained from eating it, while other Christians said, “No, it’s perfectly fine to eat that meat.” He *might* be talking about how some Christians observe certain days as favorable or unfavorable on the basis of astrology or pagan religious traditions – he may even be talking about *sabbath* observance – while other Christians say that *all* days are holy to God.

We don’t know, and to be honest, it really doesn’t matter (the specifics of what he’s talking about here). The point he’s making is that there are disagreements among Christians as to how to live out and practice their faith. What’s important to notice here is that Paul does not *resolve* their disagreement. He does not say, “You guys are right, and you guys are wrong.” What he *says* is, “You shouldn’t be *judging* each other.”

Now, this gets a little tricky because Paul *does* identify one group as being “weak in faith.” He says that those who eat only vegetables are “weak in faith,” and we can infer that those who observe certain special holy days are included among the weak in faith. So, he’s saying not to judge one another, but in a sense, he’s judging and categorizing some of them. And we have to be careful that we’re not positioning *ourselves* as the “strong in faith,” while those people who disagree with us are “weak in faith.” But Paul is not *criticizing* their faith. He is simply saying, “You may be *here* in your faith, while these other people are *here*. They aren’t where you are yet. And that’s okay, because it’s only by God’s grace that *you* have been made strong in *your* faith, and so it is by God’s grace *they* will be strengthened and upheld in theirs.”

What Paul tells them to do is not to judge or criticize or even correct each other. He tells them to “welcome the weak in faith.” That word *welcome* loses some of what is intended in the original Greek. The Greek word here is *pros-lambano*, which means something closer to, “to take near, to take by the hand, to draw near to.” Don’t just welcome them like, “Hey, how you doing? You’re welcome here! Have a seat!” This is more like coming alongside them, taking their hand, and journeying through life and faith together with them. Don’t just *tolerate* those who have different beliefs or practices than you do. Don’t just “coexist” with them like, “You do your thing, I’ll do mine.” Draw near to them. Befriend them. Walk with them. Love them. They are your loving partner on the journey of life.

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So Paul says that we are not to *judge* one another over our differences in belief, but we are to *love* one another in the midst of them. And he says three things here, three main reasons that we are not to judge one another. First, he says that every Christian is a servant of God. We each belong to God, have been accepted by God, and are loved by God. So who are you, he asks, to judge the servant of another? This other person, they aren’t *your* servant. They don’t belong to *you* that they have to do whatever *you* think is right. They belong to God. He says, “God has welcomed them.” God has drawn near to them, taken them by the hand, and is walking with them through life and faith. So we don’t judge this other person because they don’t belong to us. We don’t get to have that say in their life. They belong to *God*.

The second reason we aren’t to judge one another, Paul says, is because they are *all* seeking to honor God. He says, “Those who observe special holy days are doing so as a way of trying to honor God. Those who say all days are holy are seeking to honor God each day of the week. Those who eat meat are seeking to honor God by saying, ‘God has set us free from judgment under the law so that we can eat this.’ Those who abstain from eating meat are seeking to honor

God because they think this helps them keep their lives and faith pure.” Everyone here is seeking to honor God. They are all doing what they do in an attempt to give glory to God, and *that* is what truly matters.

Now, that doesn't mean that we can just do whatever we want and justify it as honoring God. Paul knows that these issues he's talking about are peripheral to the gospel. They aren't *core* issues. It's like *how* we share communion or how we baptize or what kind of music we use in worship. These are matters of *preference*, and either way, you can honor God, as long as that's what you're being intentional about doing. Paul is *very clear* all throughout his letter about the kinds of things we *can't* do, the kinds of things that do *not* honor God. He talks about some of them just a few verses earlier – drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, jealousy. He says elsewhere – fornication, impurity, idolatry, sorcery, anger, and factions. Paul is always very clear that this isn't a matter of “anything goes as long as you can justify it as honoring God.”

What he's *saying* here is that there are some things that are core issues and some things that, either way, you can honor God. But even in those matters of preference, those periphery issues that don't have gospel implications, how we *respond* to them *does*. Even in our differences, we have to respond to one another with love and patience and peace and forgiveness because *those* are *core issues* of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even in the stuff that doesn't matter as much, how we respond to one another in our disagreements over them *does matter*. When you can meet someone who completely disagrees with you on some matter of faith, when you can meet them with *love* and *patience* seeking *understanding*, *that* honors God.

The final reason we don't judge one another, Paul says, is because that role is reserved for God. Each of us are accountable to God. God will judge us. It's like that quote I've shared before by Billy Graham, "It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge, and my job to love." You can't see this person's whole life, and you don't get to decide whether they are *worthy* of God's love...or yours. All you are called to do is love them, being strong enough in your own faith to trust that God is at work.

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So how do we live life together with people who believe completely different things about God and practice their faith in totally different ways than we do? By recognizing that this other person does not belong to *me*, they belong to *God*. They don't have to do things the same way *I* do or the way I think they should do them. They answer to God, not me. All I have to do is come along side them, take them by the hand, and love them as we walk through life together. It's like the quote that is often misattributed to Augustine and other theologians: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." In *all things* practice benevolent love toward your neighbor, love that seeks the wellbeing of the other. Because *righteousness* is not about *being right*. It's about living in *right relationship* with God and with each other.