

"What It Means To Be Saved"
Studies in Romans
Lesson Twelve: "Salvation and Judgmentalism"
Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide
Lectionary Year A
September 11, 2011
Text: Romans 14:1-12
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In this passage from Romans, the Apostle Paul seems to be concerned about the problem of quarreling within the church over strongly held opinions on religious practice. Imagine that: Christians disagreeing and then fighting over how best to honor God. Paul specifically mentions a couple of issues. One concerns what to eat, whether to eat anything a person might want to or to abstain from eating meat and be a vegetarian instead. That may not seem like a big deal to us, but it was in the early church. We can relate, at least a little, to this type of concern, for there still is a debate in some corners of the church concerning whether Christians are free to consume alcohol and still be considered faithful or whether followers of Jesus should abstain from drinking altogether. Well-meaning Christians today are not of the same mind in this regard.

The second issue Paul mentions has to do with the church calendar. One group within the faith community feels like special high holy days ought to be observed, while the other group believes all days

are holy and that no one day is more special than any other. Again, we find such a distinction in the church today. I grew up in a faith tradition that never celebrated Advent and never observed Ash Wednesday, Lent, Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday. Except for Easter, there were no special Sundays honored. Even Christmas Eve was not seen as a worthy occasion on which to hold a worship service. There still is disagreement in the church with regard to special days and the honoring of God by recognizing them and setting them apart.

These two opposing groups, which Paul calls the weak and the strong, can be characterized as conservative and liberal. One commentator describes them as follows:

One group insists on making sharp distinctions, whereas the other sees [the lines as more blurred]. One sees unbreakable principles at stake; the other sees principles [more in terms of] flexible guidelines. One argues that to concede this point means that the whole house of cards collapses; the other argues that if the house is that fragile perhaps it should collapse. One sees a crucial point at stake; the other doubts whether this one point is the single axis on which the whole religious universe turns. Small circles versus larger circles. Narrow boundaries versus wider [ones]. Black and white versus shades of gray. Obedience versus freedom [Craddock et al, p. 440].

All of this should sound pretty familiar to us. Paul well could be describing the difference between the more conservative evangelical church in our country today and the more liberal mainline church.

Within our own denomination, at least with regard to certain issues, there is the kind of controversy Paul characterizes. Make no mistake about it. We have taken sides in the church. We disagree a great deal over certain matters. There is sharp division when it comes to religious belief and practice. Even in our own congregation, we are not of one mind when it comes to some of the issues currently being debated in our society. We are not completely immune from the so-called culture wars.

Paul has some advice for the church when it comes to having strong individual opinions, yet getting along together as a community of faith. I think his advice is extremely timely and something we could stand to apply to our own situation in the church in our country today. The apostle begins by suggesting that *we ought to welcome diversity of opinion*. We should invite, not just tolerate, conflicting views within the congregation [Brueggemann et al, p. 484]. That means we have to listen attentively and respectfully to positions that may be the polar opposites of the ones we take. We have to be genuinely open to those persons whose beliefs and practices are radically different from ours.

In order for us to welcome diversity in our congregation, however, *we first have to acknowledge that diversity even exists*. Here is what I mean by that. Over the last five-and-a-half years I have served here, I have observed time and time again that people in

this church seem to assume and take for granted that everyone else in the congregation has the same viewpoints they do. Since that is the case, no one feels the least bit concerned about making a comment in a Bible study, a Sunday School class, a committee meeting, or a fellowship activity that winds up being offensive to someone who does not share that same viewpoint. It seems the idea that someone might not agree with the comment being made is never even considered. Everyone who attends Schreiber thinks just alike appears to be the underlying assumption.

Well I can tell you that it ain't so. There *is* diversity in this congregation, whether some people recognize it or not. I know for a fact that a lack of sensitivity in this area has caused some people to drop out of attending certain Bible studies and such. They simply got tired of experiencing their opinions and feelings about things attacked or ridiculed, even though the person doing it had no idea such was the case. It was not done out of intention; it was done out of ignorance. We are not all alike here, thank God. We don't all share the exact same stance on issues, praise the Lord.

It would be unrealistic if we did, and it would be unhealthy if we did. If the church is going to model to the world around it what genuine community looks like and feels like, it has to model unity within

diversity, and the church cannot even begin to do that if it doesn't embrace diversity and see it as an asset instead of a threat.

Paul goes on to discuss what I feel like is the most important piece of advice he shares with the Roman church and with us. *We are not to pass judgment on those persons whose views differ from ours.* We are not to be judgmental. That does not mean that we don't maintain our own convictions. As the apostle states, "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds." It is perfectly appropriate and acceptable to have beliefs and to hold on to them strongly. We need to arrive at the positions we take with deliberate thought, having been willing to do the necessary study it requires to be able to articulate well the viewpoints we have. But we welcome opposing arguments and the opportunity to have open and honest debate over the things we hold near and dear to our hearts and minds. *There is a big difference between healthy debate and unhealthy dispute.* Questioning is one thing; quarreling is another.

What seems to be most important to Paul and should be most important to us as well, is *to avoid hate*. That is what passing judgment can lead to. That most often is the end result of judgmentalism and of the quarreling that accompanies it. The two opposing sides of an issue can grow to despise one another and even to demonize one another, and when that is the case, fellowship breaks down and community is

impossible. Paul is more concerned about community than he is about anything else when it comes to the church. That is why he doesn't take sides on the issue he describes. That is why he reminds his Roman readers that ultimately all of us, every last one of us, stand under the judgment of God, to be held accountable for what we think, say, and do. The more we focus on God's love and mercy and grace extended to all of us, the less we will be hateful toward one another just because we don't agree on things.

Salvation and judgmentalism don't belong together. They should not exist side by side. They have nothing, absolutely nothing in common. Why? Because we are saved by grace, which means that *because of our faith in Christ, God refuses to judge us*. He has every right to judge us and to find us lacking severely in every possible way. Each of us has sinned and come short of the glory of God. We deserve to be judged and judged harshly by God. Yet he does not. He chooses not to. Instead he chooses to be gracious and merciful and understanding and sympathetic. And so should we be toward one another because God has been that way toward us.

We are talking about community, how to have it and how to keep it. As a country and as a church we aren't in community because we are divided, and because we are, what Paul writes to the Romans can and should be applied by us in our situation in such a way as to bring us

together. We need to invite and be open to opposing viewpoints. We need to hold on to our own convictions without judging and then condemning the positions taken by others. As we are better at saying than we are at doing, we need to agree to disagree. And most of all, we are to keep from despising those persons who disagree with us. Hate only makes matters worse. Hate only deepens the divide. Hate creates such a gulf between us that almost nothing can bridge it so as to bring about unity.

Almost nothing. Today is September 11. Do you remember how united we were as a country and as a church ten years ago? I certainly do. I remember two completely packed worship services on the Sunday morning following that tragic event. I remember how as a nation, we collectively bowed our heads and bent our knees to look to God for the resources we needed to deal with what we were feeling—shock, dismay, vulnerability, fear. It was as if we knew instinctively that we needed to turn to God in such a moment, and so we did. We sought to honor God, even as and especially as we felt more unsafe and insecure than perhaps we ever had felt before.

We seemed to know in those dark days what Paul is saying in this passage when he states that “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." We seemed to understand as we faced that tragedy a decade ago that above all else in this life, we are to live in such a way as to honor God with all we think, say, and do. On that September 11, we were able to avoid quarrels by refusing to be judgmental of each other, because we decided, even if for only a brief period of time, to live individually as though we belonged to God and seek to honor God in the way we live together in community with the same sense of belonging. At least in that moment we were willing to see every person as a child of God and thus as a brother or sister of ours.

That ultimately is how we can avoid being judgmental and avoid the quarrels that arise from that attitude. As we remember and reflect on that fateful day ten years ago, may we act on our remembering and reflecting by welcoming diversity of opinions because everyone belongs to God. May we hold on strongly to our beliefs and practices as a way of honoring God. May we refrain from judging, much less hating those who disagree with us so that we can remain in community as we honor God together. May we stay on our knees before God, not just for a few days after a tragedy like 9/11, but every day. And may we honor God by showing the kind of respect and restraint and regard toward one another that allows us to continue to be more concerned about what unites us than what divides us, what can bring us together more than what can keep us apart.