

Year A Proper 24 Thick With Love Romans 14 vv1 to 12

Paul is very bluntly telling the listeners of his letters to get over their differences of opinion. The differences he is writing about today are what we would think of as petty – trivial and unimportant. What does it matter if someone is vegetarian and another person is a meat eater? We don't blink an eye when vegetarian dishes show up on the table at our potlucks. If this issue is unimportant to us today – petty in our opinion – then what use to us is a passage of Scripture such as this? Why proclaim it aloud during worship just as it was proclaimed to an entirely different group of people so very long ago?

This concern of Paul's *does* impact our lives. We can learn a couple of extremely important things, from this ancient passage, that inform and hopefully transform how we exist as the body of Christ today. What we think of as unimportant – eating meat or not eating meat – was, in fact, also quite unimportant to the people of the Roman house churches who were hearing it way back then. But they did not dismiss Paul's words as irrelevant. This issue of what food to eat had been extremely important about a decade earlier. We know from another of Paul's letters that this issue was very volatile, people were taking sides, rifts were being created, the young church was being divided. The problem was that, in the pagan culture of the Gentiles, meat available for purchase in the market had almost certainly been slaughtered in reverence to one of the many gods worshipped by various groups of people. Unsurprisingly, some of the people following the way of the one God of Israel, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, were very hesitant to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. This could be disrespectful to God. It could be wrong in the eyes of God. They were not going to eat this tainted meat and

they stuck to vegetables. These many false gods apparently did not eat their veggies. Other people, though, figured “So what if the meat was sacrificed to a god I don’t worship? I believe in the one God of Israel. I follow the way of Jesus the Christ. I’ll be fine. It’s no big deal to eat this meat.” The two sides were judging each other by their stance on this issue. Judging others in Scripture does not simply mean approving or disapproving – often harshly, contemptuously disapproving. Judging a person, as used by Jesus and Paul and others in Scriptures, means I am deciding who is in God’s kingdom and who is out instead of leaving that up to God. So, the people were judging each other and those who ate meat started attending a house church filled with *only* those who ate meat. Those who refused to eat meat attended a different house church filled with *only* those who did not eat meat.

This scenario of judging resulting in church division, I’m sure, will sound familiar. Issue after issue over the years has resulted in division – most recently the ordination of women, allowing divorced people to remarry or even share in the bread and wine during worship, and the latest, same-sex marriage in the church. We can learn from Paul’s letters that, what was in recent memory a hot issue, a divisive issue, is now a *non*-issue. It was not worth the verbal battles, bitterness, and parting of ways. You can be sure that there were still some holdouts clinging to the certainty of their particular position on the topic but they are alone in the minority.

Perhaps you noticed that Paul does not say either way whether one is to eat meat or to abstain from meat. His message is not about which side is right or wrong – there may *be* no right or wrong but, rather, only a difference of opinion. There will

always be differences of opinions among humans. That's a given. Paul is teaching us what to do as the church about differences of opinion.

First of all, we are not to judge. Paul is making it clear, following the teachings of Jesus, that God is the only one who judges. God decides who has eternal life in his kingdom and who does not. "Who are you to pass judgement on the servants of another?" Paul asks. And, again, later, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or, why do you despise your brother or sister? That place is not ours to hold.

Just as important as withholding judgement is what Paul says next. The ones we look at with disapproval, "they will be upheld," Paul says, "for the Lord is able to make them stand." God has welcomed them, he proclaims. And we are to welcome them too. "Welcome those who are weak in faith," he instructs us. Not so that we can convert them to our side of the issue...just welcome. Welcome as God welcomes.

Welcome those who are weak in faith. You can sure that people on both sides of an issue are looking at the other side as the ones weak in faith. What Paul has already pointed out to us, though, is that, in God's eyes, we are all weak in faith. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, he tells us (Rom.3:23). Yet God offers us rescue anyway. We hear the same thought in our liturgy each week: "God welcomes sinners and invites them to his table." Each of us is imperfect yet loved and welcomed into God's kingdom and we are to extend that same welcome to all of the other imperfect humans around us.

Our knowledge and understanding of these things – the non-judgemental welcome of all as God welcomes – is crucial to Paul. He *really* wants us to

understand and practice this. Why? The answer involves both God's purpose and who we are. We are God's children and together we are the Church. Being the Church is not something that only exists each time we gather for worship. The Church is the people – the people are children of God forming the body of Christ. We cannot be a member of Christ's body one moment and then not the next. It's 24/7. Being a part of the church – a member of the body of Christ – is not an hour of worship on a Sunday morning or at any other time. It's permanent. It's who we are. It is a way of life, not an hour of worship. We are drawn together by the Holy Spirit not as individuals, but as members of the divine body of Christ. In our worship, we are a living fulfillment of God's purpose. God's purpose, as I've said many times, is the reconciliation of all things in Christ. God's wants all of creation to be in right relationship with each other and with God. In last week's Gospel, we heard that when two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he will be among us. We learned, in that Gospel about resolving conflict in the Church, we learned that when two or three are gathered in the spirit of love and reconciliation, Jesus is among us to help us achieve reconciliation. Unity...being one...is top of the heap for why the Holy Spirit draws us to gather together in worship of God.

In his life, death, and resurrection, Christ created community across the most fundamental of differences: Jew and Greek, slave and free, even the dead and living. God reconciles even the seemingly irreconcilable. When we acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and God is ruler of all things, we acknowledge that all other power is less. All other powers, even the power of our most carefully thought-out opinions, are less than the ultimate power of God, the reconciling power of the love of God. Division is contrary to God's purpose of the reconciliation of all things. When the church divides it is the body of Christ who divides – painfully

dividing the One who died to unify. Division is contrary to the purpose, to the very existence of God who is unity – three persons, one God.

All of this is not to say that we need to tolerate and accept everything. Just a little after this snippet that we hear today, Paul writes, “For the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (v.17).

Righteousness and peace and joy. Paul writes that we are *not* to do whatever we want (Gal.5:17). The Holy Spirit guides our thoughts and behaviours to lead us to what Paul names as the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal.5:22-23). We do not leave our common sense behind at the door. We know that all things contrary to the fruits of the Spirit – the way of love – are not welcome. Any and all things leading to violence, oppression, hate...are not welcome. This is why Paul teaches us to, “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.” Quarreling leads to taking sides and taking sides can lead to distrust, dislike, even hate of the other. We all belong to God and our focus is on that: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord,” Paul declares. In life and in death, we are the Lord’s. We are children of God – members of the body of Christ, a body that is nothing but love. There is an English proverb that says, “Faults are thick where love is thin.” We are, each one of us, and the Church together, “accountable to God” (Rom.14:12). Therefore, let us be thick with love.