

## Romans 14:1-11

### **In Honour of the Lord**

How many times in the last week have you had conversation with people regarding inconsequential things? Did you get hot and bothered about any of those conversations? If not in the last week, I am pretty sure you could recall an incident where you got upset about something that, when you reflect on it, really didn't matter in the big scheme of things.

Well, this is kind of where Paul is coming from as he writes this part of the letter to the Christians in Rome. This was a young church trying to figure out how best to be the church in its own time. These were new converts who had diverse backgrounds. From those who had worshipped other gods, to those who had deep roots in the Jewish faith, and food seemed to be a topic in which they had gotten bogged down.

Now we can understand this to a certain extent. We likely all know people who are vegetarian or even vegan. We know about Kosher foods and that there are dietary rules for those who practice the Jewish faith or Islam. We know people who are celiac or lactose intolerant. Food is not such a big deal for us in terms of who eats what, but in that time, it appears to have been a conversation that sparked controversy. So, Paul uses this conversation, or controversy, to write about some important points regarding what it means to be a Christian.

To put it mildly there was a lot of judgement going on. People thinking their way was the "right" way of living out their faith. And believe that Paul would not have been writing about this if it hadn't gotten out of control. It turns out that when you bring diverse people together it is challenging work! Here we have people of different casts and class coming together because they believe in this one Lord, Jesus Christ. But no one easily drops all of who they are because of their faith. This transformation is something that is worked out over time and in community.

In the case of Romans, there were people who were freemen of privilege and those who were enslaved. These groups would not normally have been together. As well, there were people who differed in theological expressions of their faith, bringing with them their lived experience as Jewish or those who had previously worshiped, or may still were worshiping other Roman Gods. This was not some homogenous group of people who had it all figured out.

So often we think that the early and ancient church community lived in peace and harmony and that just was not the case. Over and over again, Paul in writing to different fledging Christian communities was trying to teach people how to live in Christ and work out the tenants of the Christian faith.

This particular writing hits on a few important points in just a few verses. The first word we read is “welcome”. That word comes to us again when Paul talks about passing judgement on each other when God has welcomed all regardless of what the individual or groups have to say about each other(v3). One’s first and continuing experience of community is that it should be welcoming. Today’s reading from the letter to the Romans is about how Christians relate to one another. This part of the letter is not about how the church relates to those who do not call one another Christian. Yet, how we treat each other has a bearing on how the world views the church and how we witness to our faith in Christ.

If we are not welcoming of one another, how in the world are we going to be honest and real in our welcome of those who enter into our homes, workplaces, and especially our churches. And not passing judgement on each other when we live out our faith differently is a way of welcome. Here I am talking about those things that are really inconsequential to how we live out our faith. It may not be about food, maybe it is about the time and date of the bazaar, or when we do one activity or another. We may feel the need to pass judgement on whether or not someone’s regular attendance, or lack there of, at Sunday worship is a reflection of the strength of their faith. Do they participate by volunteering of their time and money to support the church? But these things are really inconsequential to our faith.

We attend worship, volunteer, give of our resources, in response to God’s love and forgiveness and God’s grace and work in our own lives, but this is not something to be judged by any one of us. The important piece here is that whatever we do we do in honour of the Lord. If we give of our time, energy, money, or talent, we do it in honour of the Lord. We give cheerfully and don’t worry about what the other is doing. Maybe our example and our joy will be a witness to another about what God’s work in our own lives has done. It will certainly do more to attract people to the faith than judgement and dissension.

All of this does not mean that there is no place for difficult conversations about what is important in our church, but we must still be cautious about judging another. The recent decision to affirm the marriage and ordination of people of different sexual orientation is and has been an important and difficult conversation in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. There still is no real unity in this decision within the church across the nation. So how are we called to not judge each other, but rather love one another even with those difference in opinion? How we respond to that question is important as we navigate being Christians in a denomination that is struggling with the impulse to pass judgement on people whose views differ from their own.

Paul says, do what you do, but in all of it honour the Lord and give thanks to God for “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...we are the Lord’s.” (v7,8). More importantly he continues, “Why do you pass judgment on your [siblings in Christ]? Or

you, why do you despise your sibling?" For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

So often we forget that God will be the final judge of our lives. This is not to strike fear into you. Jesus died so that we could be forgiven for not getting it right all the time, but that does not mean that we have now no responsibilities for our thoughts, words, and actions. Will you get to be with God in the end? I believe so. You are forgiven. We say that every time we do the prayer of adoration and confession followed by the assurance of pardon.

God is a God of love. But that also means that if we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord over our lives...Lord over all...then we should take seriously how we behave, how we love, and how we live. In other words, we live and do all our living in honour of the Lord. We are the hands and feet of Christ.

If we are judgmental, unwelcoming, believe our way to be the "right" way or the only way, then we face not only God's judgement, but also run the risk of being a broken community of faith. And I will not be the first to tell you that living in community and particularly Christian community is hard work. I wish I could count on one hand the number of times I have had to be forgiven for what I messed up in my last ten years here. And yet I have been forgiven, over and over. This congregation, and individuals within it have no doubt been frustrated by me at times, as you may have been with others or others with you. We have all judged. Still there has also been much working together, planning, and changes.

We have a lot of work to do in the coming months, regardless of what church you belong to or what is going on in your own life. It is tough work living out our faith; it always has been in communities of faith. We are diverse people, with diverse experiences. We come from different places in the world, have different languages, maybe even have come from different faith or religious traditions.

What Paul is saying is, let's get past judging others in the church and I would add outside of the church. Let's get on with being the church together, loving one another, accepting one another as Christ accepted us. For as Paul writes in another verse later in chapter 14, the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who serves Christ with these guiding principles is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (v17-19).

We do all our living, our community, our work and our worship in honour of the Lord. Thanks be to God.