

**“Sacrificing our right to be right”
by Rev. Frances Savill
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Romans 14:1-12

This morning I’m preaching on a passage that doesn’t get a lot of coverage but is very important to understand. The text takes a little explaining for background, but it seems to me that what Paul is getting at, the principles he lays out for the church, are foundational for us as a community.

First, Romans is written to the church in Rome, and then circulated to the other churches, to be read by the community. It addresses problems specific to that church, but most are also issues that are common to other congregations.

The beginning of Romans Paul has laid out how we are new creations in Jesus. We are forgiven, we are in Christ, we are adopted into the family, given a new standing, saved, and set free from the power of sin and death.

And so, in light of this standing we have in Jesus, we are to live as a new community, people of the kingdom of God. But what does that look like exactly? Last week we heard Paul’s instruction that we owe each other love. We are instructed to serve one another.

This morning Paul moves to a particular problem that the church was dealing with. It had to do with eating meat - and in more general terms this is about eating what is clean and unclean.

These questions came up in the churches because Christianity, right from the outset was a diverse movement that attracted Jews and Gentiles, from many different places and backgrounds.

Christianity has always been multi-ethnic. And that, of course, causes problems- it’s not easy to get along with people from the same background and race, let alone get along and worship with people of very different cultures and backgrounds, languages and race.

Biblical, Christian faith says not only should we do this, but we must do this.

By definition, we are to give our first allegiance to Jesus- we bear the name of Jesus. Everything else in our lives takes a secondary role or is even given up for the sake of the gospel.

Our clan, our tribe, our ethnicity, our family, our heritage is held loosely when we join the family of God, or they are given up all together. We trade our old name, our old status, our old ways of relating, and become brothers and sisters in Christ, and answer to one Father.

In other letters Paul says it more strongly. In Galatians, Paul writes to the church that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus. All that divides us is broken down.

The old ways of relating to each other, the old ways of thinking about ourselves, and who we are, are transformed as we become part of the kingdom of God and this large family of God. One day, we will be around the throne of God together, people from every tribe and nation, worshipping together. That image of us together in worship, is to be lived out in the church today. That all sounds well and good but living it out day by day is another thing.

One of the issues for the church in Rome and the church in Corinth had to do with eating meat - meat that was offered to idols, or pork meat, or meat that was for some reason unclean. And Paul calls the church to work things out with a few basic principles.

First, this conflict the church was having wasn't an essential tenet of faith. No one was going to argue that they were saved by what they ate or what they didn't eat. But there were people in the church whose conscience was deeply affected by the issue.

Can you imagine being from a Jewish background, and like Paul believing Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was Jewish. He was the Messiah promised to save Israel.

It wasn't an easy thing to give up the dietary laws that you had kept all your life. That was the faith you were raised in, that was the faith of the Messiah. It must have been a great challenge. Paul teaches that it is not important to eat meat or not eat meat, but to do everything in faith to God.

For those who were gentiles, often they gave up worshipping idols. There were often at feasts given as part of the worship of idol gods, food was offered to the god in worship, and then people would take the food and take it home and eat it.

If you worshipped Ashera last month, and were a new follower of Jesus, it could be quite confusing and difficult to see a brother or sister in Christ go to the Temple of Ashera and get meat that was just offered to Ashera in worship.

And so, Paul advises the people not only to do everything with a view of giving thanks and doing it before God, but also to do it not just thinking about themselves and their freedom of conscience, but to consider others. We are to live with a view to helping one another.

When discussing the same issue with the church in Corinth, Paul tells them of his own example. When he's around Jews he will eat what they eat, when he's around Gentiles he will eat what they eat. In every circumstance Paul looks to build up others, to not be part of quarreling over things that are non-essentials, because he is accountable to God.

Paul instructs the church not to look down on one another, not to treat each other with contempt, and not to judge one another, for God has accepted the others in the church. I remind myself that every person in the church is someone God has called into the church.

Do you ever find yourself judging someone else in the church? Do you ever find you're looking down on someone? Do you ever get irritated, and want to throw your weight around about getting what you want in the church?

Our new life in community is to be about serving one another, but it is also to be about laying down our own rights, laying down our preferences, even laying down our right to be right. It's an attitude of humble service that we all saw characterized in Jesus' life.

Here Paul's instruction to the church again:

Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the

faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience. What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.

So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. (Rom 14:1-12 The Message)

Eventually, we're all going to end up in the place of judgment, facing God, side by side. May God continue to teach us, and lead us, so that might be a day of rejoicing together. Thanks be to God.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we are good at being right, we are not so good at laying down our rights to serve our brothers and sisters. God, you have taught us, you have forgiven us, you have been patient with us when we are wrong headed. Help us to extend the same grace to one another. Lord God, one day we will be before you, side by side, may we learn to live today in a such a way, that it will be a day of rejoicing. Amen.