

This morning we continue in week two of our four-week sermon series entitled, “Learning to Love Our Enemies.” Today’s scripture comes from Paul’s letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome. A few things to keep in mind about the Book of Romans: The Apostle Paul, the author, makes some assumptions that his audience consists of believers who already know a good bit about Jesus. Paul never visited in person with the Christians in Rome, as he wrote this letter from Corinth; therefore, one of his purposes in writing them is to introduce himself, his authority as an apostle, and his message to the believers in Rome. Romans itself indicates that the Christian community there was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Most of Romans is about Paul’s central convictions about the gospel. In the first half of this letter, Paul focuses on God’s love for believers. Right before today’s passage, Paul has just reminded the believers of Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself and how that command fulfills the law (13:9-10). Paul, assuming that the world was about to end, urges the followers of Jesus in Rome to “wake from sleep” (13:11) and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (13:14), making urgent the importance of living their lives wholly in accordance with God’s will. What we find in Chapter 14, however, suggests that in this community of faith, love has possibly been pushed to the sidelines and judging seems to be front and center. Let us listen for a word from God but first let us pray. **PRAY.** Read Romans 14:1-13 (Common English Bible). **READ.**

Let me start by saying that there is a big difference between different points of views and just plain ole bad theology that harms others. Here Paul is talking about differences in point of view: differences in ceremonial practices that aren’t central to the gospel. He is not saying that they should

stop advocating for their respective views, as Paul clearly values engaging in theological arguments as evidenced throughout his writings. Paul says very clearly in today's text that each person must have their own convictions (v. 6). However, Paul's concern here is the **spirit** of Christians who are arguing. I've encountered fellow Christians who have asked me to share my opinion and then turn and say something like, "Well, I think it means that I believe the Bible and you do not." "I'm having a hard time seeing Jesus in you, too!" I want to say, but I don't. However, I am not an innocent bystander. I, too, have judged my sisters and brothers in Christ whose opinions differ some from mine. I'm embarrassed to confess this but sometimes when I visit a church- whether in person or online, and I don't notice any women in leadership, I quickly begin to make assumptions and form judgments. I forget that we're brothers and sisters in Christ and that conveniently makes it easier for me to dismiss them as my enemies and not being in the "family." If a church uses no-taste, paper thin wafers instead of fresh bread for communion, I've also been known to turn up my nose. If the sermon isn't scripturally based, I sometimes judge my colleagues. If the music is too slow...you get the picture. Let me just say from experience that it is tough to praise God- the entire point of worship and daily living- if you're busy passing judgement on other people! But I'm sure none of you know anything about that, as you've never tried to change someone's opinion or way of doing things within the church nor judged anyone who interprets scripture or lives their faith in ways that may not exactly be up to par with your standards or expectations. As Paul says earlier in Romans, often many of us "think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think" (Rom. 12:3), and we develop self-righteous attitudes towards those with whom we disagree. As this passage indicates, this has been an ongoing

challenge in the church for a long, long time. Imagine though what it would look like for others and for us if we welcomed one another instead of being judgmental?

In today's passage, Paul writes to the believers in Rome to welcome those who are weak in their faith. Don't welcome in order to pick a fight with them but instead welcome them because God welcomes them. Sometimes that it is easier said than done. Paul seems to know that in this particular Christian community in Rome, **love** is rather absent as is **unity** in the body of Christ. It doesn't sound like the hospitality is the best either. It appears that some believers (identified as "weak in faith") who follow certain practices when it comes to food and observe some days as holy while others (identified as "strong in faith") don't. The two factions seem to be highly critical of each other, each claiming to be right, and Paul attempts to mediate, not taking sides. There seems to be no respect for the ways that each group works through matters of faith and daily practice. As I mentioned earlier, Paul is talking about differences in practices that aren't central to the gospel; however, "the way believers in the community **treat one another** is central to the gospel" (workingpreacher.org, Elizabeth Shively). Remember Jesus' command to love one another?! Paul reminds the church in Rome to live as one body of Christ, **equally in need of God's grace and equally recipients of it**. "This will happen only if they lovingly welcome each other, including their cultural differences- matters that obviously don't matter in Christ" (*CEB Study Bible*, p. 297). Maybe then when it comes to one's faith, the labels "weak" or "strong" or "right" or "wrong" must go away?! When I became a vegetarian over 27 years ago it was for religious reasons, but it wasn't because it was a rule in the Bible. I

decided to give up meat cold turkey as a spiritual discipline- a reminder of rekindling my relationship with God after my freshmen year in college at summer camp. However, people still felt compelled to comment on my dietary choice (yes, some of us who have the privilege of choosing these dietary changes can sometimes be self-righteous), and they would ask me jokingly but not, “Isn’t it a sin **to not eat meat?**” or “Where in the Bible does it say you should be a vegetarian?” It sounds along the lines of something that may be happening here in today’s passage. “Although the disagreements do not necessarily reflect a Jewish-Gentile conflict (for example, Jews observed dietary restrictions, but they weren’t required to be vegetarian), Paul’s teaching highlights that, in the end, what matters most are not these particular piety practices, but rather the relationship of God with believers” (West). “Paul argues against judgmentalism on the basis of three theological rationales: 1) that they should welcome one another because they have been welcomed by God, 2) that the weak have the same Lord/Master as the strong (vv. 3-4), and 3) that both groups do what they do out of full conviction and to honor the Lord (vv. 5-6)” (*New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge).

But generally speaking, handing out judgment is so much easier than accepting those we’re judging. We become convinced that we are right on an issue or topic and determine then that our own preferences or opinions are the norm. Prolific writer and theologian, Anne Lamott, reminds us to be careful with this line of thinking: She says, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” Judgments can be bold or subtle snubs. Imagine receiving a solicitation with the hook: “Ready to annoy the religious right?

Or... “Ready to annoy the religious left?” Let’s say you typically support this organization, “but the spirit that can delight in ‘annoying’ anyone has forgotten the love that loves enemies. That kind of spirit participates in the harmful, in-group/out-group ‘spirituality’ that develops identity in opposition to enemies and in commitment to some cause. That kind of spirit has forgotten that our identity as people of faith is not derived from politics, economic, or moral standing or from identification with some people in opposition to others” (*Feasting on the Word*, William Greenway). Our identity- all of us- is children of God. So why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Paul asks. It’s an in-house (and out-of-house) question that we must constantly ask ourselves. “For a community that lives, every last one of us, solely by forgiveness and grace, keeping up a running commentary on what we disapprove of or dislike in one another is outrageous. Critical barbs and gossipy asides are corrosive and corrupting” (*The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*) **to the body of Christ**. Imagine if every judgmental word out of our mouths violated an eternal soul for whom Christ died. Paul doesn’t think of the people in the Roman church as Jews and Gentiles, males or females, slaves or free, but as people “for whom Christ died.” Paul cuts through the “us vs. them” by stating a pivotal truth for all Christians: we’re all united in Jesus Christ. Sisters and brothers in Christ, for whom are you supposed to live? “We don’t live for ourselves and we don’t die for ourselves. If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or we die, we belong to God. This is why Christ died and lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (vv. 7-9). We are ALL subject to the lordship of Christ! Some may recognize these verses from funerals; however, the context comes straight from this text where Paul is teaching the community on how they

should live together. All of our lives belong to God- and to each other- Paul says- so stop holding one another in contempt! And before we go to justifying our judgments or saying, “Ok, we’ll just tolerate those people.” Be careful. Paul is not talking about settling into a culture of tolerance. No. He is talking about a deep commitment as followers of Jesus Christ to adopt a culture of love, hospitality and an appreciation of fellow believers.

So, how do we learn to love our enemies starting today? One of the practices I began using several years ago when I catch myself in judgment of another, is to try and do what educator Parker Palmer suggests: turn to wonder. I wonder what makes a church believe that women aren’t just as called to proclaim the Gospel as men are? I wonder if they don’t have anyone to bake or purchase bread and that is why they use wafers for communion? I wonder if that preacher had a bad week and that’s why the sermon felt so disconnected?! Another practice is to turn to prayer instead of judgment. When you feel a judgment coming to your thoughts, lift up that person in prayer. A last practice I’ll mention sounds almost too simple and yet it is often most difficult. Try remembering that your enemy is also a child of God, subject to the lordship of Christ just as you are. Each of these practices lead toward compassion and mercy- toward life. However, self-righteousness, the certain judgment that God is on MY side and not yours- leads toward all kinds of death. Friends, it is God who judges, not us. “Paul is not negating political, doctrinal or moral realities, but he reminds us that they are not the ultimate, that first and last we stand **not because** we are in the right, **but because** by grace we are the Lord’s” (Greenway). Paul says, “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (v. 10). Everyone is weak and accountable before God. Yet, the good news is that through Christ

we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand” (5:2). Imagine if we abstained from judgment and welcomed one another. How might the world look different? Amen.