

Reflection on the Scripture: Romans 14:1-12

[[The video of the reflection.](#).]

Today's reading from Romans was a hard one for me. I mean, I get the basic message: don't get all stressed out about the small details of living out your faith. Keep focused on the big picture. So long as everyone is honoring the Lord and giving thanks to God (Romans 14:6), just work with it.

The way Paul lays it out, those who are "weak" in faith (and who wants to be weak in faith?) are those who rely on a lot of guidelines to keep them on the straight and narrow. Those strong in faith don't need so many rules, they rely more on God's grace. Those who are strong shouldn't bully the weak into giving up their guidelines. Those who are weak shouldn't look down on the strong for not having a more structured approach to their faith. And everyone should leave the judging to God.

I am aware of the irony of this message coming from Paul. He's pretty dedicated to telling a whole lot of people, strong and weak, exactly what they should do. And he doesn't seem averse to a bit of judgment now and again, when he thinks a church could use some. But perhaps because of that, I'll accept that he has a lot of experience in this area, so if he says to back off, I'll believe him.

The challenge I have with this whole passage is: where does it end? Who do I get to judge? Do I refrain from judging just the members of church I belong to? Other Christians? What about folks who I know aren't Christians, but have a deep faith of another tradition? What about the really committed atheists? Or when I don't know what their faith situation is, we just work together? Or we're part of the same political situation? Because there are folks who I know who would 100% say they're Christians and they do things I can in no way fit into any understanding of Christianity that I've ever heard of. This passage says I shouldn't judge people, but it seems to me there has to be a point where judging people and deciding I *definitely* do not want to be in any kind of fellowship with them is the only sane path to take.

Paul was writing to these churches in Rome to get them to help with the next step in his ministry. He wanted to bring Christ to the province of Spain. Paul had been shockingly successful in the eastern Mediterranean. Now he was being called to head to the western end. Where they had not heard of Jesus Christ. Where there were very few Jewish communities. Where they didn't speak Greek or Hebrew, two languages he spoke well. Where they didn't really speak Latin, a language he didn't speak all that well. Paul's whole process for sharing the Good News that had worked so well in Corinth and Ephesus and Galatia was not going to work at all in Spain. He needed the financial support and the contacts that the

Roman congregations could offer him if he was going to have any hope of reaching the native people of Spain.

But more than that, the people who were native to Spain, not the Roman imperial hierarchy, all the carpet baggers and political appointees and soldiers there to keep trade flowing and the taxes rolling in, the people who were native to Spain were seen as barbarians. They were dismissed as uncivilized, uncultured, barely human. Just resources that needed to be harnessed if the Roman Empire was going to get the full value out of the territory.

Those were the people that Paul was being called to serve. They were completely different from Paul himself. And they were the people God was sending him to, to share that amazing reality that Jesus had shared with Paul all those years ago on that road to Damascus. Paul was being called to those people, the ones who had been written off by everyone except for the value of their labor and the wealth of the land they worked. Paul wanted to tell them about Jesus Christ.

Paul wanted to tell the native people of Spain, *whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.* (Romans 14:8-9) Christ died and rose in order to create community across the most fundamental of differences: Jew/Greek, slave/free, dead/living.¹ Christ is with us in life and in death, indeed, who else is with us in death?² Paul wanted to bring that message to the people of Spain. He wanted to reassure them that there was no single person who was beyond the reach of Jesus' saving love.

And if he was going to bring that message to Spain, relying on the contacts and finances of the churches of Rome, then they needed to stop undercutting his message by saying that some people were somehow not going to be saved because they only ate vegetables or kept a different calendar. Because if life and death couldn't separate you from God's love, surely a slice of sirloin eaten on a Thursday afternoon couldn't separate you from Jesus' salvation. Paul wanted, Paul needed, the churches in Rome to start living out their beliefs.

I admit in this crazy political, Covid-19 year, I need to hear Paul's message. I need to hear and believe that nothing, nothing will separate me from the love of

¹ Mary Hinkle Shore, "Commentary on the Second Reading: Romans 14:1-12", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for September 11, 2011, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost", https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=217&print_type=comm&is_sp_anish=0 (accessed 18 April 2020)

² John Knox, "The Epistle to the Romans: Exegesis," vol. 9 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 622.

God, not in this crazy life or on the other side of death. And sure, to hear that message, I may also need to hear that I need to keep working on the truly biggest picture. That nothing separates me from the love of God and nothing separates the people I want nothing to do with from the love of God. And that I am the least qualified person to judge who is in and who is out. There is nothing more different from me than the love of God, and that is what I am counting on for my salvation. Perhaps the most sane thing I can do is to let go of my conviction that somehow I can keep myself separate from other people. Perhaps the most sane thing I can do is remember that we are all transformed by God's grace in the end into something redeemed by God.

Perhaps I can accept that my faith is weak or strong enough to believe that and live that way. Perhaps not. But maybe it's worth following Paul advice and seeing what happens when I do. When I stop struggling over who I'm allowed to judge. Because if God isn't drawing a circle to make insiders and outsiders, then maybe I shouldn't be either. Maybe that will turn out to be easier than trying to figure out something I can't possibly determine. Amen.