

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Romans 14:1-12, “We Belong to the Lord”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/13/2020**

Smoke. Fear. Terror.

Confusion. An unknown future.

Will anything be the same?

Then hurt. Loss. Anger. Blame. The desire to find someone responsible for all this.

How can we make sure this never happens again?

19 years ago, on September 11, two planes crashed into the Twin Towers in NYC,  
and the emotional process of our country went something like this.

Today, contours of our emotions in the Northwest fall along similar lines  
as we emerge from Red Flag warnings and fires  
that have devastated our region.

I wasn't consciously considering that the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that terrible day  
was arriving last week until I went on the Yam-co Watch Facebook page  
to catch up on the latest fire news in Yamhill County.

On the top of the page was a fireman's helmet  
with the words, “Never Forget: 9/11, FDNY.”

It struck me that the source of our terror and dismay is very different now,  
but the feeling of sudden change and disorientation is very similar.

My children weren't born yet on 9/11/2001,  
but for those of you who were, do you remember what else happened in our  
country? An incredible unifying and rallying together.

We also see that happening in our region.  
Nobody asks or cares if their neighbors or the firefighters  
are voting for Joe Biden or Donald Trump.

In the face of an emerging threat to our common good,  
those small things begin to fade into the background and we lift up  
our common humanity.

That's happening for Paul in Romans 14.

He's looking at a fledgling church – one that he didn't plant and hadn't yet visited.  
And he knows that there are cultural forces at work threatening to split  
the church in two.

We see a lot in this passage about eating meat or vegetables,  
and observing special days,  
but this was about much more than what's on the menu.

This church was threatened by a struggle over identity  
-- what makes each group who they are.

The Jews may well have been the vegetarians because I don't think  
Kosher delis were easy to come by in ancient Rome.  
So rather than compromise their faith,  
they chose to eat a vegetarian diet.

Think about the strength that takes, the determination.  
These people were willing to stand out against the crowd.  
And yet, this position is referred to by Paul  
as being "weak in faith."

I think we should think of "weak" and "strong" as being in quotations  
throughout this passage, for I don't think Paul is really advocating  
for either position as being the better way.

Instead he's suggesting that whether your faith convictions  
allow you to stay at home when a stage 3 evacuation order comes  
(and thus you are "strong in faith,")  
or if your conviction is to leave in stage 1 evacuation order,  
(and thus you are "weak in faith,")  
this is not the most important part of who you are.

If your faith convictions allow you to walk around  
without a mask on in the pandemic  
(and thus you are “strong in faith,”)  
or if you feel you must walk around  
with a mask on in the pandemic  
(and thus you are “weak in faith,”)  
the more important characteristic is to refrain from judging  
the conviction of others in your faith community about such things.

What is the most important thing?  
Not your faith convictions about particular scruples,  
but the person in whom your faith is placed!

When Paul says not to judge others,  
he uses a clever analogy:  
“Who are you to judge *someone else’s servant?*

(Who could that someone else be, I wonder...?)

“To their own master, servants stand or fall.”

Which is to say, they are given rightful presence or cast out / rejected  
on the basis of the master’s judgment.

“To their own master, servants stand or fall” (then here comes the twist!)  
*and they will stand.*

Here both sides of the Roman church want Paul  
to declare the fools on the other side to be those who will be falling.  
But instead Paul says that the servants being judged,  
whatever side they are on will stand. Why?

“for the Lord (that is Jesus) is able to make them stand.”

The end result is that the church, whether those who are weak or strong  
must stand together because the grace of our Lord Jesus  
is sufficient for whatever their failings may be,  
and he is able to *make* them stand.

Judgement and division have no place in a house of grace  
because none of us are able to stand on our own merits. Amen?

Rather than a “one size fits all” spirituality,  
Paul suggests that everyone live out the courage of their convictions  
with love toward one another, while being careful not to cause  
others to stumble.

This is not a watered-down, opinion free, anything goes kind of relativism.  
This is thoughtful, principled care for our sisters and brothers in Christ.

This perspective Paul is offering has the effect of uniting the church  
while looking to the core of their identity that goes beyond their  
differences of opinion.

This is the same effect that 9/11 and the fires have had on us:  
it unites us in a realization that something  
bigger than ourselves holds us together.

And just like with 9/11 and just like with the fires that plague us,  
it took something terrible for them to realize it:  
the death of Christ on the cross.

If Christ had not died, these Jews and Gentiles would never be reconciled.  
They would never have seen their unity through a common Creator  
who loved them enough to die for them all  
“while they were yet sinners.”

Instead, they would all go around accusing each other  
in their so-called “strength” or their so-called “weakness,”  
and the gospel would never bear the fruit of the Spirit in their  
communal vineyard.

#### ILLUSTRATION:

When I was a college ministry intern at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle,  
I led a group of college students on a Spring Break mission trip  
to Ensenada, Mexico.

The college ministry had a long-term relationship with an orphanage there,  
and so every year a group of students would come down for a week,  
camp on the orphanage property  
(where Pepe the Bull would wander around unthethered  
from time to time), and spend the week playing  
with the kids and helping out with various projects.

No doubt the local workers could have done the same work  
with more skill if we had just donated the money.

But that would never have taught me what it is  
to find joy together with a young child  
by playing soccer in the dirt with them.

We didn't share a language, we didn't share education, we didn't share nationality,  
we didn't share the same family structure.

But we shared in Christ's love for us,  
and that love was made manifest in the worn-out ball  
we kicked across the dirt, running around in the hot sun,  
and then eating together, and then singing songs  
in Spanish that I pronounced so poorly  
the older kids would laugh.

The best thing about traveling is encountering people  
who are so different from you, and then realizing  
that there is so much that is the same.

We have this in common because there is one God over all who made us,  
who loves us, and who calls us into fellowship with Christ,  
who rose victorious over sin and death that we might find  
forgiveness and reconciliation with God, humanity,  
and all of creation.

And so Paul says, **"If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die,  
we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.  
For this very reason Christ died and returned to life so that  
he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living."**

What a word to us as we face the flames of wildfires.

What a word to us as we face the worst pandemic  
any of us have ever known.

What a word to us as we face an election  
of paramount importance for our democratic institutions.

In light of that, we have no business looking down our nose at one another  
in the church.

We are here to be one body, made of so-called “strong” parts and “weak” parts,  
honorable and dishonorable – but all made worthy and fully welcome  
because of God’s grace to us through Christ.