

“The Spiritual Practice of Christian Community”

Romans 14:1–12

Do Not Judge Another

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'
¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Good morning! I want to thank Pastor Sharon for inviting me to preach this morning – this is a very special invitation to me. This is my home church, the church I grew up in, was baptized, confirmed, and married in, the church where I was nurtured by worship, a strong children's ministry, and a vibrant youth program. It is because of and in the midst of this community that I was able to realize very early on that I felt called to ordained ministry.

This church began supporting me in my journey toward ordination nearly ten years ago – both as I first sensed and articulated my calling, and then in the candidacy process. I am so thankful that you continue to support me today as I enter my final year of seminary at Harvard Divinity School. So I stand before you today very grateful for the ministry of this church, and what this

place continues to mean in my life and the life of my family. You are indeed my church family, and I am so happy to be home.

I mentioned that I first felt God calling me to ordained ministry almost 10 years ago, and of course the phrase '10 years' is not far from anyone's mind today – the 10 year anniversary of 9/11. Not an easy day to preach on, but definitely not a day to ignore. In the past ten years we have witnessed a transformation of the world as we knew it, and many of us are filled with memories of that day. While most of what I will talk about this morning will relate to the lectionary text that I just read for us from Paul's letter to the Romans, any text about living in a community where difference exists can help us think about our post-9/11 world, and how we can work towards peace in all our communities, religious and political...since the barriers between the two are often extremely thin. But before moving on, I would like to pause and have a word of prayer, acknowledging our grief, both remembered and still acute for so many. Let us pray:

Gracious, Almighty God, today we join millions of others to mourn acts of terror and violence, senseless deaths, manifold sufferings. God of hope and love, we know you continue to bring healing to the families of victims, that you are at work in the world bringing peace and understanding across boundaries, and that one day, You "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away" (Revelation 21:4). Lead us in your Way, and help us as we seek to live as faithful disciples of Jesus, your Son. In his name we pray, Amen.

Any time we come to an anniversary of something – whether that be a joy-filled anniversary, like those which celebrate a birthday, or a wedding, or a sad anniversary, such as the death of a loved one, or remembering a national tragedy – and look back on the thing being remembered, the way we think about the day or the person or the event is always shaped by the double-edged reality created by time called 'perspective.' I say that perspective is double-edged because sometimes we remember whether we want to or not. Anniversaries mark something or someone that shapes us, and the perspective we develop shapes not only how we remember that anniversary, but because we are human beings, with complicated connections between our bodies, souls, and minds, the perspective we have on an anniversary can very well shape a much larger part of our daily existence.

Where Tim and I live, in the Boston area, there is an advertisement for a church that has been prominently displayed in the designated area of many of the subway cars for some time now. It features a quotation by C.S. Lewis which says, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else."

Although I'm kind of sheepish to admit it now, when I first saw this add, I thought it was a little silly, even though I agree with its sentiment! I thought to myself, "Believe in Christianity? Everyone knows that the religious tradition called Christianity exists!" Lewis is being much more sophisticated than what I first understood him to mean, however. He is not using the word 'believe' to suggest that the act of believing means acknowledging the existence of something. Of course belief means more than that! It has to do with how we see, the perspective we bring to everything we do or encounter. Just as we see the beauty of the earth by the light of the sun, Lewis is saying that we can come to understand the world around us, our purpose, the image of

God within each person, and so much more, through our identity as Christians. We walk by faith, not by sight, because faith is a way of seeing. Our faith, cultivated over time, wrestled with, questioned, tested, nourished and cherished shapes our perspectives, shapes how we see what we see.

In the section from Paul's letter to the Romans that we read this morning, he has a thing or two to say about perspective, and particularly about how Christians see one another. The first line of this passage always makes me smile, it's so typical of human experience! Paul writes, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions." It makes me smile because perhaps a more generous Paul would have said, "welcome those who think differently from you," but in a letter about not judging others, he instead describes those who disagree as 'weak in faith.' I hope we can all see the humor in this. Paul's words are so wise, and even he, inspired as he is by the Holy Spirit, can't seem to help himself this one little jab. So, smiling, let's continue.

What Paul *seems* to focus on and what I believe he is *actually* focusing on are quite different. It might *seem* that Paul is focused on the spiritual practices he looks at – that of eating meat or practicing dietary restrictions because of religious motivations, and that of holding one day (most likely the Sabbath) as particularly sacred, versus counting all days as equally blessed. But, you may notice, Paul moves past the details of these practices fairly quickly!

No, I think Paul is trying to put *difference* into perspective. The fact is that in any group of people, even in a group united by faith in Jesus Christ, difference is a fact! It is a reality! This reality comes with beautiful ideas, inspiring and powerful, which can stretch us to think in ways we would have never imagined if *our* thoughts were the only ones we ever came across. This is the motivation behind our value of education, behind collaboration and even travel in many cases. Difference brings with it many gifts...and, as we also know, difference comes with some difficulties.

This is a small, silly example, but anyone who has ever helped someone else fold a blanket, knows something about the inconvenience of difference. You both start off holding two corners, but then habit sets in. Do you bring the two corners into your left hand, or your right hand? It really throws me off when someone folds in the opposite direction than me. I have to constantly readjust as we go along, because I am used to doing even this simple task quite differently.

Paul is not really dealing with dietary practices or sabbath practices in this passage...or with folding blankets. He is addressing the reality of difference when it shows up in expressions of faith, and Paul knows that this is a subject to take seriously. He could have chosen to write out in great detail his own opinions on these practices! (We know Paul is very capable of this!) He could have spent more time explaining why he thinks one thing, why he thinks another opinion is flawed...but he does not do this. Why not? Something else is more important to Paul.

Paul puts these contested convictions into perspective, and looking at them, he says, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Talk about perspective! Paul has a clear vision about who any and all spiritual practices are for in the first place! Paul says, listen up – we are, each one of us, God’s servants, God’s children. In absolutely all things...even death! so definitely in life, we are God’s. Paul is also clear that our relationship with God matters for how we should treat one another, and how we should respond to each other’s differences.

I have mentioned spiritual practices a couple times now, and I want to say more about what I mean by this term. When I think of spiritual practices, I think of the things that we do on a regular basis as people of faith to deepen and strengthen our faith.

On the website for our denomination, umc.org, spiritual practices are discussed in terms of discipleship. The General Board of Discipleship writes, “Discipleship is about loving God.... It is the deep desire to know God, to be one with God, and to worship God.” They go on to say, “There are a variety of ways that we can develop our knowledge of and love of God. These include Prayer, Bible study, Worship, Fasting, and Conversation with other Christians.

In closing, the website reflects, “John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, called these practices means of grace. They are means for developing our relationship with God and for experiencing God’s presence in our lives. These practices help us spend time with God, a significant factor in loving God.”

I think one reason that “conversation with other Christians” makes the list of practices mentioned by the Board of Discipleship is that in these conversations, we build relationship with one another, and as we do so, we are learning to be part of a community where we honor differences, and our differences are honored. I’m not at all convinced that being in Christian community would be a spiritual practice if we all agreed with one another on everything. The church is not a community where we stop caring about difference, or become individualistic in order to avoid the work...and in many cases it is work...of understanding another who believes something different than we do. Christian community is about loving others, because Jesus tells us that we cannot possibly love God if we do not love others. Christian community is about a regular, committed practice of being with the diversity of God’s people, and seeing God there. Christian community is about coming together, both in spite of and because of our differences, to serve God the best we know how, and to continue learning what God is calling us to be as the church. There is a group for Methodist students that meets at my seminary, every Wednesday morning from 8-9am...let me just pause here to stress that 8-9am is a very, very early time to expect grad school students to be up and on campus ☺. If I were preaching this sermon at school, you might have heard gasps as I mentioned this time ☺. Still, several of us manage to make it each week, in spite of the difficulty of the time, because we know the practice of this sleep sacrifice is unquestionably worth it because of the community we are forming, shaping, and being on each of those mornings.

We gather as a Covenant group, so we have a document drafted by Methodist students several years before our time, but which we have adapted as needed, and this covenant is divided up into subjects so that we can discuss one each week. One week we talk about Acts of Compassion, the next we will talk about Acts of Justice, then Acts of Devotion, Acts of Worship, and finally

Spiritual Promptings and Warnings. When we get through all of these topics, we start the cycle over again...and the conversations are never quite the same.

I have made some incredibly meaningful friendships here, both with people a lot like me, and people very different from me. I don't know if these friendships would have formed if we had not been gathered in the name of Christ, engaging in the spiritual practice of Christian community. Maybe we would have seemed too different from one another. Maybe it would have seemed like too much work to get to know each other, what mattered to each one of us, and how to bridge the gap in a way that surpassed mere toleration. I am so thankful that it did not. Instead, this group became for me and for others, a place of meaningful ministry, meaningful relationship. It didn't become so overnight, and it wasn't easy to keep going my first year in the early, very cold Boston mornings of January and February. For a while I remember wondering, "why am I putting all this effort into a group of people I hardly know, and spending time discussing topics that are important to them?" Paul, in this passage, might have helped me figure this out sooner, but I eventually experienced it myself. I was engaging, without even knowing it, in a means of grace, and God's grace showed up powerfully.

"We do not live to ourselves," Paul writes. Living or dying, we belong to God, and we know this because of Christ. So if we do not live to ourselves, if we live to the Lord, how will we be in community together?

Paul's letter to the Romans is amazing and humbling to me all at once. Paul is pointing out that our own relationship with God is one of grace, certainly shown to us, but also certainly shown to those who disagree with us, who relate to God differently. Grace shows up in our relationships with one another as people of faith, and it does so as we engage in a spiritual practice that runs deeper even than some of our heart-felt preferences. Grace in action, and what I think Paul is really saying that Christians are called to focus on, is the spiritual practice of how to be, and live, and grow as a community. A community united, yet diverse, focused on worshiping one God, but possessing perhaps as many ideas about how to do that as there are people in the community.

Engaging in the spiritual practice of Christian Community means choosing, because of our faith in Jesus Christ, to be in and around difference even when it is hard, even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient. And why do we do this? Because we are not the only people in the world moved by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – God has offered grace to the whole, diverse world! As people from all walks of life respond to the grace of God in their lives, and people who differ from one another gather to worship God together, Paul's words ring true and are still a powerful challenge to us today: "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand."

There is a little girl in the church I serve on staff at in Massachusetts, who just learned how to walk. She's been ready and willing to be walking for a while now, and after church we'd see either her mother or her father walking behind her, holding her up by her hands, and following wherever her eager little legs would carry her. Such a beautiful image both of determination, and of love.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul reminds us that we are different, as if we needed reminding! ☺ There are so many beautiful, beautiful moments when we are part of a church family. Babies learn to walk in our midst, couples married for 50+ years celebrate their lives together. We pray for each other, support one another through hardship, and share the ups and downs of our lives with one another. There are also difficult seasons when we commit to being in community for the long haul, because this spiritual practice takes practice, takes the perspective that develops over time, and deals with differences that matter to us...if they didn't, diversity would be an empty word, and interacting with others would be a lot less enriching, creative, and meaningful. I think we all know this in our heads. When our hearts really deal with difference in communities that mean the most to us...that brings a new kind of knowledge. When our hearts and emotions respond to difference in addition to our heads and our reasoning, that is when I believe God is present to root us on, holding us up by our hands, encouraging us and loving us as we struggle for the strength necessary to walk in the way that Jesus taught us.

I am so thankful for this church, this community of the faithful which has supported me in so many ways, and for so many years of my life. You are the people who have taught me the true value of Christian Community, you have been the people I have practiced alongside, who have encouraged me from the very beginning of this journey, and who constantly surprise me with the abundance of your love and care. Really, I cannot fully express my gratitude to each of you. On Tuesday I have an interview with the District Committee of Ordained Ministry, where they will decide if I move forward in the ordination process this year, or if I will wait until next year. As this interview approaches, I am overwhelmed by thankfulness for the formation and support I have received from this community. I pray that God blesses you for the blessing you have been and continue to be.

We live not to ourselves, but to the Lord, and when we live to the Lord we also live in community, learning to love one another as Christ loves us. May that ever be true in this place. Amen.