

Four weeks ago, we started reading passages from Romans, we read the first half of Romans 12, then the second half a week later, and I mentioned that Paul had never been to Rome. He was writing to a church he had never attended, and yet, he knew things about them. After many chapters of beautiful theology, he switches gears, and implores them to love, and it seems like he's hinting that there is a lack of love, perhaps.

Well, in chapter 14, Paul addresses the elephant in the room, the tension that he has heard about even though he has not witnessed it himself. There's trouble afoot in Rome.

You see, people are criticizing each other. The church is in crisis. A civil war is breaking out between the Sharks and the Jets if you catch my drift, and Paul, very politely, since he hopes they will pay for his travel expenses to Rome, says, "Shut up! Don't sweat the small stuff . . . and it's all small stuff you're upset about."

Hear these words from the Message translation in Romans chapter 14.

"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.

²⁻⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶⁻⁹ 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.

¹⁰⁻¹² 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. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in Scripture:

“As I live and breathe,” God says,
“every knee will bow before me;
Every tongue will tell the honest truth
that I and only I am God.”

So mind your own business. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

This is the bold, bold word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This sounds incredibly liberating! Freedom of conscience to worship and live as we see fit! It's incredible! We have such grace given to us! Christianity is so open and tolerant of different ideas, and diverse, and kind to each other! We're not to sweat the

small stuff, the differences between us are not for snuffing out, they're for beauty in diversity!

Thanks be to God that apparently small differences in how we worship just don't matter! We're not boxed in to how we have to live or eat or practice or dress or sing

And yet . . . that's not our experience, is it? Church has not been a place for us to be independent in our practice, has it?

As a kid, my mom told me that in the church she grew up in in Chicago, the girls *had* to wear skirts or dresses at all times, even in the winter. No freedom there.

Growing up, we could only wear white shoes between Easter and Labor Day. Apparently there was a rule!

Hats off inside. No shorts in the sanctuary.

No red meat on Fridays. No tattoos.

Hymns only. Or no hymns at all.

No celebrating any holidays except Easter.

No drum set. Yes! Drum set.

No dancing. No playing cards.

No divorce. No children out of wedlock.

No wasting of the wine. No alcohol at all.

No instruments in worship.

No. No. No. No. No. A list of conformity and obedience.

How did we get so far from Paul's instructions in Romans 14?

Paul, you remember, grew up as Saul, a Jewish boy who was raised to do things by the book. He became a Pharisee who persecuted those who did not adhere to the rules the way he was taught. He arrested Christians and even held people's coats as

they stoned a Christian named Stephen to death. He certainly had experience sweating the small stuff. He had a reputation as a man who rigorously enforced keeping the particular details of the law – and in passing judgment on others who didn't see eye to eye with him.

But then, on the road to Damascus, to go arrest more Christians, he was blinded by the light and spent a lot of time with people who loved Jesus who weren't like him and he realized that not all of the people who loved Jesus had to be carbon copies of each other. He found great value in the leadership of women. He implored people who owned slaves to treat them like family members. I think he even started eating pork, which was an absolute scandal.

He changed, and he became a champion of inclusivity, grace, and individuality. He advocated for Gentiles to join the church without having to first convert to Judaism, which was a big hurdle, especially for the guys if you know what I mean.

So, he hears about a church that is quarreling with each other about many things, and he writes, "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."

Why is this not the commandment that churches are meant to inscribe on the doorframes of every sanctuary? Why are legislators not proposing bills for this verse to be in public school classrooms? Why is it not the litmus test of what a church should be? How have we gotten so nasty with each other?

The most challenging thing about today's church, I mean, the first century church, I mean, every church, everywhere, throughout history, is the infighting. It makes us look terrible to people on the outside. It hurts young people and drives them away from organized religion. I mean, who would want to become a Christian if it meant you'd

be criticized by your siblings in the faith over small discrepancies about how you practice?

Who knows how many people have been disheartened by the harsh words of a church-goer about their food or hair or clothes or voice or who they love or the decision about when and where to meet for Sunday School or what hymn to sing or what color the carpet should be?

I've said it before, but there's a quote attributed to Mahatma Ghandi that says, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." This is the summary of the failure of the church in a nutshell. If we are cruel to each other, why would anyone seek to join us?

But let me ask you this, how on earth can we embody this instruction from Paul? Being the church – practically - is hard work! How do we balance tradition and ritual with individual freedoms and modern realities? In the first century, the church struggled to blend Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians together with their fights about food and calendar and holidays. In the middle ages, Protestants and Catholics split and still cannot see eye to eye on very much in the way of worship anymore – from indulgences and confession and saints and so much more. And Protestants have split on everything from baptism to slavery and communion and female ordination and marriage equality and more. And guess what's next . . . the next generation of Christians will face the challenge of how much to incorporate AI technology into worship.

Just last year, I met a pastor in the West Hartford area who is working very hard on creating a virtual reality worship experience in which church members put on a VR headset at home and feel like they were in the sanctuary. Not online worship through a laptop but virtual reality worship with the goggles immersing you in the environment.

That is coming, friends. And pastors are already getting in trouble for using AI to write their sermons. I would never do that! I hope you can tell the difference.

But would Paul say to us, some of you worship with VR headsets and some of you want to rub shoulders and hug one another in person. Do it all to the glory of God?!?!?

I don't know. I just don't know. Living this out – living out radical inclusivity and hospitality is hard. Really hard. It would have been so much easier if Paul had said, "So, I hear that there's tension about what to eat and when to worship and what to celebrate. That's understandable. You all are from different cultures. Just establish churches that meet different needs and comfort levels. It'll be for the best. Less fighting and more worshipping and fellowship with the people you're comfortable being with."

But he didn't say that!!! He said, "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."

You wonder why I keep repeating those verses? Well, it's because we've been dividing congregations up based on our preferences and comfort levels for centuries.

I came of age at the time of praise music's surge. Churches began dividing over this issue. Many had to have a contemporary service at one time and a traditional service at another. But it didn't stop there. I love this meme that came out years ago of a church sign that reads, "Classic Service at 8. Contemporary at 9. Mid-Century Modern at 10. Post Modern at 11. Boomer Service at noon. Millenials at 1. Blended Service at 2. Happy Hour Service at 4."

That seems to be the only way to please the people these days. Divide and conquer. Please everyone by segregating everyone.

But I keep envisioning what the kingdom of heaven on earth looks like, and I cannot picture 487 different houses of worship with 487 different bulletins and instruments and technology. A section that forbids instruments for the Church of Christ folks, and a section that forbids women from the pulpit and a section that forbids

dancing and a section that forbids women wearing pants and a section that forbids queer kids and a section that forbids grape juice in communion cups. Is that what we think heaven is like? Is that the only way we can be comfortable worshipping?

Paul never gives the church permission to split into the carnivore and the herbivores. Or the holiday party goers and the stay-at-homers. He says, embrace with open arms those who have different opinions than you do.

Some cheer for the Knicks. Some for the Spurs. Do it all for the glory of God.

Some cheer for the Patriots. Others for anyone but the Patriots. Do it all for the glory of God.

Some are comfortable with a drum set in a sanctuary. Others think it's blasphemy. Do it all for the glory of God.

Some pray to Mary. Others don't see that as necessary.

Some genuflect and kneel during worship. Others sit and stand.

Some use wine in their communion cups. Others use grape juice.

Some take communion weekly. Others monthly. Still others quarterly.

Some baptize babies and declare that God loves us before we can even articulate what love is. Others wait until the one being baptized makes that decision for him or herself.

Some meet on Saturdays. Others on Sundays.

Some require a year of confirmation classes. Others just a few weeks.

Some align with one political party. Others sound more like another.

In my heart, I hope, that in heaven, we don't sweat the small stuff. Because I don't want to go if there's segregation at the table and mean whispers behind backs, and yet, even still, I cannot figure out how all the people who believe that Jesus Christ is Lord can worship together without rolling our eyes and saying mean things. I just don't have the answers. So, Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy. Amen.

