

## September 13 – The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

### Who Do You Think You Are?

It's a curious thing how multiple children from the same parents can have such different personalities. This can cause parents to either marvel at the wonder of God's creation or pull their hair out in frustration. Many people attribute this to the birth order. Firstborn, middle child or baby of the family. Where are you in your family? Birth order seems to be a factor in the way you behave. Not the only factor, but a factor never-the-less. They say the firstborn tends to be the leader of the pack, reliable, conscientious and structured. They may be achievers as well as controlling – just ask any younger sister or brother. Middle-born children tend to thrive on friendships and be people pleasers. They may be peacemakers, but they can be more rebellious as well. Then we come to the last-born, the baby of the family. [That's me.] They tend to be fun-loving and outgoing as they seek attention, but they can be manipulative and self-centered. Do you fit into any of these categories?

Of course, these are generalities. Expectations and reality often do not match and many “jump the track” and follow an unexpected path. This really causes parents to lose their patience, pull their hair or fall back in amazement. Beware when someone says, you have an “amazing” child. It might have hidden meaning!

My wife and I have three sons and I can see many of those characteristics in them. First-born, a leader and reliable. Middle-born, a people pleaser with a heavy touch of achiever, the last-born fun-loving and the center of family excitement. All of them at one time or another made us pull our hair. And all of them have made our jaws drop with delight in them.

Yet, with all these differences in personalities, these same children belong to and receive their identity from the same mother and father -- a fitting reflection of our life together in the body of Christ, the church. Many different personalities,

many different gifts, yet we are one in Christ. As St. Paul says in Romans 14, “We are the Lord’s”.<sup>1</sup>

### **Romans 14:1-12**

In chapter 14, Paul continues to flesh out both the freedom of the Gospel, that is, righteousness by faith in Christ; and the active service of loving one’s neighbor. While Paul specifically addresses ancient religious issues of food and festival laws, his words also teach us today not to use our Christian freedom in ways that harm the faith of our neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

He writes: *“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.”*<sup>3</sup>

The one who is “weak in faith” refers to a fellow believer who is uncertain about how to exercise Christian freedom. This need not refer to a person who is weak in faith in Christ, the faith that receives the righteousness of God. Thus, the use of “weak” does not imply that the person is about to fall from faith. Rather, the exercise of Christian freedom within the fellowship of believers calls for the welcoming of our brothers and sisters, not for the purpose of quarrelling but for the inclusion of all. Paul makes this clear in addressing both the one who eats and the one who abstains. ‘Paul confronts problematic (knotty) attitudes and behaviors on both sides of the issue. He admonishes the strong not to despise the weak and the weak not to judge the strong. Which one has God himself “welcomed,” that is, received into his home – the one who is weak and eats only vegetables, or the strong who is convinced that he may eat anything?

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<sup>1</sup> Different Birth Order, Same Family, Concordia Pulpit Resources, Vol 30, p.4

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Romans 14:1-3, ESV

Paul's point to the believer on one side of the issue is that God has also received the fellow believer on the other side of the issue. God receives them both!<sup>4</sup>

Now, before we mentally remove ourselves from this ancient issue, the principle applies not just to meat and vegetables, but to other matters among believers. We, here at St. Matthew, have our own customs and preferences. Some of us use the common cup, some of us the individual cup. Some pray while sitting, some standing, some kneeling, [the older I get, praying while seated is becoming so appealing]. Some make the sign of cross at the mention of the Trinity, some do not. Some sing or pray with hands raised in praise, some do not. These are all matters of Christian freedom and Paul reminds us not to judge one another nor divide the Christian church over matters in which our Lord Jesus Christ has made us free.

*<sup>4</sup> Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.* In this verse, Paul confronts that same weak person who eats only vegetables, for judging the strong person who believes he may eat anything. He makes it clear that servants are answerable only to the master. Since the strong, eat-anything believer belongs to the Lord, the weak, abstaining believer has no place to judge his fellow Christian.

The phrase he will be upheld (or will stand) and the phrase the Lord is able to make him stand (or cause him to stand) both “magnify the Gospel promise that each believer, credited with the righteousness of faith in Christ already now, will indeed stand acquitted on Judgement Day (overruling any presumptuous human judgements).”<sup>5</sup>

Paul makes a parallel argument with respect to festival days and sabbath days. And again, refers to eating and not eating, since both do so in honor of and giving thanks to God. Such things are done in Christian freedom and with

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<sup>4</sup> Concordia Pulpit Resources, Vol 30, p.20

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Middendorf, 1398

thanksgiving. This is the attitude all Christians should have throughout their lives.

In verses 7-8, Paul drives home his main point. <sup>7</sup> *For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.* <sup>8</sup> *For if 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.*

No Christian lives selfishly to himself alone and no Christian dies alone. Whatever our position on food, days, customs, forms; the matter of final importance lies in who we are. We belong to the Lord. “Our relationship with our crucified and risen Lord is paramount because we, each of us individually, and all of us together, belong to Him.”<sup>6</sup>

This section of today's epistle ends with: <sup>12</sup> *So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.* Paul reminds the Christians in Rome that, even though they are saved and declared righteous freely by God's grace in Jesus' death and resurrection, they will still give an account of themselves before God's judgement seat. “The notion that ‘anything goes’ abuses His grace. Baptized believers remain responsible to God for how they conduct themselves as His people in this world. Especially inappropriate, Paul insists, is judging and despising others within the community of faith on matters from which Christ has freed us.”<sup>7</sup>

When we despise or judge our brother or sister in Christ over matters of Christian freedom (food, drink, festival days, customs, and so on) we are trying to identify ourselves as God over them. In today's Old Testament reading, Joseph clearly acknowledged that he was not judging his brothers when he said, “*Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?*”<sup>8</sup> He knew he was not God, sitting in judgement of his brothers. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus' parable of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.21, R.K. Asbury

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, P.21, Middendorf, 1407

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 50:19, ESV

unforgiving servant also illustrates the problem and the solution, wherein we ourselves are living under His forgiveness and are called to forgive. Each of us is answerable to the Master.

Who do we think we are? No, we are not God to judge or despise our brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead, we are God's own sons and daughters, bought by the blood of Jesus, and washed by water and His Word. So is your neighbor. Your neighbor belongs to Jesus too. God has made us all brothers and sisters in the family of God. Both we and our neighbor have a new identity in Jesus Christ, for we belong to Him. By the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, each of us has a new identity, "We are the Lord's".

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen