

THE LORD IS ABLE TO MAKE YOU STAND

ROMANS 14:1-12; 15:1-7
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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The goal of our summer series was to go on a bit of first century road trip, to take us places, to take a peek in on the churches Paul founded, to read between the lines about the issues and challenges they were facing, etc., and to see what this might have to say to us in our city, our church, all these year later.

As I thought about our last Sunday on this theme, I was trying to find a way to summarize our summer tour. In the end, I gave myself the challenge of revisiting each of the sermons and reducing each city, each church to one sentence [point to them on the map].

Antioch: *Live generously with one another as you learn to break down old walls and live together as a multi-ethnic church, because God, in Christ, has shown no favouritism and has dealt generously with you.*

Ephesus (Stefan was our tour guide here): *In the midst of the difficulties and challenges of life, we are to be people who are always willing to “go the extra mile” for those around us.*

Colossae: *Life is full of competing ideologies, philosophies, distractions, dead ends, but we are to cling to Jesus Christ, to sink our roots deep into him as the very center of who we are and what we are called to be.*

Philippi (Doug took us on this trip): *We are invited into abundant living, lives that include celebrating, giving and receiving from God and others.*

Thessalonica (Ruth showed us around here): *Four words: Serve. Wait. Hope. This is the task for the church and for each one of us individually as we continually seek to point toward Jesus in the place where God has placed us.*

Corinth: We are part of the story of a love that has changed the world, and this love—the love of Jesus Christ for the world, for the church, for you and for me—is what urges us on in the life of faith.

So that's where we've been. We have one city left to visit and we've saved the biggest one for last.

Today we arrive in Rome.

What do we know about this city and about this church?

When we read through the book of Romans, it becomes evident pretty quickly that like virtually every church in every city on our tour this summer, this was a church trying to learn how to leave old ethnic, religious, cultural divisions behind, and to understand what the freedom offered in Christ looked like on the ground.

A bit of context: In 49 AD, Jews and Jewish Christians were kicked out of Rome by Emperor Claudius because of their fighting over whether Jesus really was the Messiah.

Fast forward to 54 AD—Claudius dead, and the new emperor, Nero, says Jews and Jewish Christians are allowed back in.

But by then the church had developed a largely Gentile character, and there was conflict with the returning Jewish Christians about the role of the law, ritual, and what the freedom of Christ actually looked like.

So, in the Roman church, Paul was dealing with two groups of people who had come to different conclusions about how the reality of Jesus Christ and what he had accomplished was to be related to their social reality.

The one group—possibly mainly Gentile believers—was convinced that Jesus had ushered in a new era of freedom—that where in the past certain things had been labeled “clean” and “unclean,” Jesus had changed things.

He had broken down old walls, old divisions, old ways of looking at things. He had demonstrated that the **whole world** belonged to God and was in the process of being redeemed. Many of the old regulations about what could be eaten and where, when were the appropriate times to worship and where, etc., no longer applied.

The other group—possibly mainly Jewish believers—was inclined toward *preserving* some of the old commandments as an expression of devotion to God and moral duty. They were quite sensitive to the evils all around them, and thought that the best response to this was strict avoidance of anything that might be inappropriate.

This is where the reference to “eating only vegetables” comes from in 14:2-3. Some had gratefully seized upon the realization that came to Peter in Acts 10.

Remember this story? Peter, the good Jew, is visiting the house of a Gentile Cornelius and he’s hungry. He falls into a trance when he saw this vision of a whole host of “unclean” animals. He hears a voice urging him to eat and vows that he will never eat anything profane or unclean.

What does the voice say?

“What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:16). This happens three times, in order to make the point that the rules have changed!

So, some folks in the church grabbed hold of this freedom with both hands—and perhaps even took it too far. Others were reluctant to leave the safety of old customs.

Both groups thought they were right. Both thought that their approach to living out the new reality made possible by the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus was the best one.

Are their similarities between first century Rome and twenty-first century Canada?
Between their church and the church today?

I think there are.

Can anyone think of a church context where people have divided over non-essential things?

Can anyone think of conflicts over things like paint colours or whether or not we should use fair trade coffee in our fellowship hour?

Those are fairly trivial examples. Pretty safe. Let’s go a step further.

What about things like musical preferences or liturgical styles? What about our understandings of the mode of baptism or about how (and how often!) we observe the Lord's Supper?

Now we're getting into a bit deeper waters, right? Perhaps we're getting a bit more uncomfortable?

Let's take things further yet. What about some of the big issues currently dominating attention in our broader church family, with the Being a Faithful Church force and the Future Directions Task force?

What do we do when we disagree about the nature and scope of salvation (pluralism) or about what it means to be a "peace church" or about our obligation to care for creation or about the demands of social justice or about the best way forward for our national church in light of institutional decline or about human sexuality?

In each of these matters, from the trivial to the profound, from paint colours to human sexuality, people in the church disagree, right?

Would Paul's counsel to us be the same as to the church in Rome?

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall (Romans 14:4).

Perhaps you are thinking something along the lines of, "ok, Paul talks about what food we can eat or what days we worship on, so we're supposed to bear with one another, to allow each other to follow our convictions on 'non-essentials.'

But what about when we can't even agree about what is essential and what is non-essential? What about when some people think that something is central to the gospel and the witness of the church and others think it is peripheral?"

This is a huge question. An important question. A question I cannot (and will not) fully answer this morning 😊.

The short answer is, we have to always look at the broad trajectory of all of Scripture and, most importantly, **the character and work of Jesus himself** as we evaluate what is central and what is peripheral.

The centrality of the life, death, teaching, resurrection, and future reign of Christ are absolutely non-negotiable. These are the core of what it means to be a Christian. If we treat these as optional these, we have, I think, ceased to be Christian in any meaningful way.

But even *if* and *when* we disagree about the question of what counts as central and what counts as peripheral, I think we *still* have an obligation to refuse to go down the road of judgmentalism. We *still* have an obligation to “not live to ourselves” but to our neighbour.

It’s not as though Paul is saying, if you differ with someone on peripheral matters you need to bear with one another and mutually submit for the building up of our neighbours, but if you differ on *essential* matters, well then treat them however you want!

That would be absurd. But this is sometimes what we see, isn’t it? Christians can be very nasty when they are defending their views about theology or biblical interpretation or morality!

On one level, this isn’t surprising, because these are important matters. These things matter deeply to us!

But still. We must resist the temptation to judgment. It is poison in the church, poison to our souls.

I’ve had conversations with a number of you about experiences in the church growing up where you experience judgment over relatively trivial things—where your primary experience of church life was one where you were constantly being evaluated and scrutinized, where you never felt you could measure up.

Many people have walked away from the church because their only experience of it was of a petty, harsh, severe institution that cared more about policing their morality and their theology, than it did about inviting them into a life *with* and *for* Jesus.

A church full of judgment alienates those on the receiving end and it turns those on the giving end into bitter and hardened people.

This should not be in the church of Jesus Christ.

Listen again to what Paul says to the church in Rome:

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? **For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.**

An account to whom?

To God.

As Paul says in verse 4, it is to our own master that each of us stands or falls. We are not the judges.

God is the only true judge.

I want to close with an irony that you may have noticed when the scriptures were read earlier.

In our passage from Romans 14, Paul talks at length about learning how to live together in harmony when *different* voices are saying *different* things.

And at the end of our text from Romans 15, we read,

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, **6** so that **with one mind and one voice** you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So which is it? Withhold judgment in light of different voices or speak with one voice?

Is Paul contradicting himself? Speaking out of both sides of his mouth? Is he confused?

I don't think so.

Paul is not saying, "You must all think and speak the same."

What he is saying, I think, is "Even when you don't think the same, you must, *with one mind and one voice*, demonstrate the same attitude of *mutual submission to one another*—together, seeking to exhibit the same love and self sacrifice of Jesus himself."

This is to be our default way of living and thinking and speaking in the world.

Our default position should *never* be, “How can I make sure that *my* understanding of faith, *my* way of putting it into practice is seen to be the best or the only one.” It should rather be, as it says in Romans 15:2, to “please our neighbors for their good, to build them up.”

And *all of this*—this default way of being in the church and in the world, is finally based upon the basic truth at the end of Romans 14:4. I read this verse earlier, but this time I want to read right to the end of the verse:

Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. **And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.**

God can make our neighbour stand. And God *will* make them stand.

It is not our job to police the boundaries of this life of faith.

It is *equally* not our job to drag along our unenlightened sister or brother to our more “liberated” understandings of what is now permissible because of the freedom of Christ.

In both of these areas, we could be *wrong*. Indeed, *all of us* are wrong about some things some of the time. This is simply a consequence of what it means to be human beings who are fallen, fragile, and finite.

We don’t see things clearly, and what we do see is tainted by our own self interest, fear, and insecurities. Our judgments always have at least a tinge of what poet Christian Wiman calls “the relentless smell of the self.”

But God can make us stand. All of us. No matter where we are on our journey of faith... No matter what our level of understanding might be.

Whatever our errors... whatever our shortcomings... whatever thorny trails we wander down... whatever dead rituals we cling to... whatever misguided freedoms we cherish... whatever wounds we have suffered or inflicted upon others...

This is the basic truth that the Apostle Paul never grows tired of rehearsing:

Our salvation does not finally depend upon us and upon our ability to get things right. Salvation is a gift of God, from start to finish. It is something that we are offered, never something we accomplish.

We do not drag ourselves up and stand tall on our own. It is the Lord who raises us up to new life, who makes us stand.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

