

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 45:22-25
SECOND LESSON: Romans 14: 1-11
September 13, 2020

“Judge Mental”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A pastor and a choir director found themselves on opposite sides of almost every issue. They disagreed about theology, politics, styles of music, even how to decorate the sanctuary for Christmas. Things just kept getting worse.

One week the minister preached on commitment, and how we should dedicate ourselves to service. The choir director then led the choir in singing, “I Shall Not Be Moved.”

The next Sunday, the minister preached on giving and how we should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The choir director then led everyone in singing, “Jesus Paid It All.”

The third Sunday, the minister preached on gossiping and how we should watch our tongues. The hymn the director chose to follow the sermon was “I Love To Tell The Story.”

By the fourth week the minister had become so disgusted by the situation that he told the congregation he was considering resigning. The choir then sang “Oh, Why Not Tonight.”

When the minister resigned the next week he told the church that Jesus had led him there and Jesus was taking him away. The choir then sang, “What A Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Conflict and passing judgment have ALWAYS been a favored human pastime, and Christians have practically made it a sport. But Paul is apparently not concerned at all that Christians have differences. He is very concerned, however, about the way we deal with them. He is very concerned about the harsh judgments we make about one another, about our legalism, our condemnation and our exclusion of other believers. He begins his discussion talking about people whose faith is weak as opposed to those whose faith is strong. Interestingly, it is the legalists whose faith he says is weak! The legalists themselves would have described their faith as strong, and accused all those liberal types of being weak!

The first item of dispute concerned those who ate anything as opposed to those who ate only vegetables. This does not remotely translate to us. A little background information is essential! Meat in the ancient world was not a readily available commodity. Where meat came from was the temples. Meat came from sacrifices—Jewish or pagan. The only Jewish Temple was in Jerusalem. Pagan temples were everywhere, and often even operated as restaurants on the side cooking and preparing the meat. What they didn’t sell

directly they sold to middlemen—local shop-owners. Essentially, ALL meat sold in the marketplace had first been sacrificed to a god. Only Jerusalem itself had Jewish sacrifices. Outside of Jerusalem there were kosher butchers in Jewish neighborhoods. Some Christians took the position that it was okay to eat meat, but only kosher meat, although this could be hard to come by. The kosher butchers might not be willing to sell to non-Jews. Since all other meat had been part of a pagan sacrifice, they said it should not be eaten. To do so constituted idolatry.

This wasn't a matter of choosing to be a vegetarian because of health reasons or not wanting to eat animals. This was about God. But there were other Christians who thought this was ridiculous, that food was food, given by God and good to eat. Paul said that those who took this view should not despise those who had scruples about the matter and refused to eat. BUT, it was equally important that the more legalistic person not condemn the one who did eat. This live and let live approach is not easy. Invariably there is always someone who will start accusing the other side of not being true to the faith.

The other battle line was drawn over holy days. It's easy to see the religious differences underlying these conflicts. It would have been the Jewish believers who were more likely to refuse to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and the Jewish believers who still celebrated the high holy days and especially the Sabbath. And here Paul says something quite unique. He says that whoever honors special days does so to the Lord. Whoever considers all days alike does so to the Lord. It is the motivation of our heart that matters, not in this case, the actual act. The issues itself are neutral. But to those at the time this was anything but a neutral matter. These were essential matters worth fighting over! Someone had to be right and someone had to be wrong.

We have to be careful not to misinterpret Paul and think that he is saying anything goes. He's not saying it's okay to kill someone if we personally don't think it's wrong to do so. There are objective standards out there. Hitler was very sincere, and very sincerely wrong. Paul is talking about our relationship with Christ. There are essentials, and there are non-essentials, but we tend to put more things in the essential category than should be there.

God does not require us to agree on every issue. Maybe I should say that again, and louder. GOD DOES NOT REQUIRE US TO AGREE ON EVERY ISSUE. But what God does require is that we love one another. "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" Paul asks. We are all servants of God, and answerable to God. In the 1st century a bystander passing judgment on another person's servant would be passing judgment on the master! It's a bit like today when parents are judged harshly if their children misbehave. If each of us is a child of God and a servant of God, then it is up to God to judge. "You, then," says Paul, "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. It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.'"

It may or may not be easy for us today to refrain from judging each other over such issues as forms of church government, how we understand communion, or adult as opposed to infant baptism, but during the Reformation

people lived or died over these things. When a person is convinced that God is on their side then even the total destruction of another group can somehow be justified. Fortunately, we no longer have the Inquisition and wars of religion, but unfortunately, we do have that same type of intensity. Only the issues have changed. Today those who are opposed to abortion cannot believe that it is even possible to be a Christian and be pro-choice. Those who believe homosexuality is a sin cannot believe that such a thing as a gay Christian can even exist, and if they do, that person must remain celibate or they are sinning. And on the other side as we have Christians on the political left accusing Christians on the political right of not even being Christians over issues of immigration, race, gay rights, health care and the needs of the poor. There is plenty of condemnation to go around. What each side tries to do is forcibly evict the other from God's family. What we are doing is holding one another in contempt.

It wasn't easy in the 1st century. It's not easy now, but the simple fact of the matter is God wants us to accept and welcome one another without any agenda to "convert" them to "the truth." The fact that God welcomes people from both sides is a surprise to both sides, because we're all so convinced that we are right and "they" are wrong. But Paul wants us to get God's perspective. We are all God's children. I don't love any one of my children more than another. They are all different. The problem in the body of Christ is not that there is a difference of opinions. The problem is the judgmental attitudes that we develop toward Christians on the opposite side of the theological or political fence.

Paul reminds us that our fellow Christians are our brothers and sisters, and you know what they say, you can't choose your family! These people are family. We're going to be connected to them for a very long time. We need to learn how to love and accept, rather than condemn and reject. Our instructions are clear. We will have brothers or sisters who we will strongly disagree with on any number of issues. We are not to reject them. We are not to ignore them and hope they go away. We are not to treat them like second class citizens. We are not to accept them in order to give them a good talking to and straighten them out. We are simply to accept them as a sister or brother, and love them. And this, my friends is really hard. But God, not us, is judge, and we should not try to take God's place. Amen.

Isaiah 45:22-25

22 "Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.

23 By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.
24 They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone
are deliverance and strength.'"
All who have raged against him
will come to him and be put to shame.
25 But all the descendants of Israel
will find deliverance in the Lord
and will make their boast in him.

Romans 14: 1-11

14 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. **2** One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.**3** The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. **4** 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.

5 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. **6** Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. **7** For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. **8** 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. **9** For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister^[a]? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. **11** It is written:

"'As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.'