

Sermon, Proper 19

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“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.”

Have you ever felt like I do from time to time, when I have to go to certain meetings, “I don’t want to go! They will go on and on about things I don’t agree with or care about. I will have to bite my tongue just to get through the meeting. I will feel like an outsider.” Can you relate to that feeling? Or is it only me?

I admit I do feel that way at times. It’s not a good feeling. Occasionally I have not known this would be the case in advance, so I didn’t realize that I would feel out of place until I arrived at the gathering. When that happens, I look for a convenient time to leave without bringing notice to my exit. That’s usually not too hard—unless you have come from out of town to go to the meeting!

That happened to me several months ago. I actually went across the continent to receive special training to help my ministry in the church. The person who invited me is a friend that I admire and I was excited to attend. When I got there, I only knew 2-3 people out of the thirty or so who were there. The training was similar in general to other training I had received in the corporate world, so that was not the problem. The people were generally nice, too. I mean they were Christian clergy and lay leaders, so one would expect that.

What happened occurred as the training unfolded. The people involved had a certain consensus point of view about the church and the world and politics and so forth. They were singing from the same hymnal so to speak. Nothing necessarily wrong with that-- but in the training and casual conversation, it became apparent that this group knew “the” right way to believe about life and God; and in subtle and not so subtle ways, they made it clear that people who disagreed with them were somehow less advanced.

Being the odd person out in a group of thirty or so produced a certain emotional result in me. First I was quiet. Then I was cautious as I tried to feel my way forward in the group. Eventually I became resentful. I prayed and tried to change my attitude and learn what I could from the group. But it was hard. These few days were a challenge for me. At the end of the training, after I shared with my friend how I felt out of place, I asked him why he invited me. He smiled reassuringly and said “We need all types at the table.”

My experience was relatively minor, really. I had a few days of discomfort (I found out later, this was when I had blood clots in my lungs, too, so maybe that was a factor). But I do remember the

feelings distinctly. I believe those types of feelings of discomfort were part of the reason for Paul's words to us in today's reading from his letter to the Romans. Some things do not change over the centuries in human relationships and communities, even—or maybe especially-- those that are communities of faith.

Paul was writing back then to address issues that caused divisions between people of faith. The issues back then may seem less important to us today. But they were real issues of principle two thousand years ago. The two main issues were what foods should be eaten based on the Bible and tradition; and which day of the week should be observed for worship. We still have echoes of those concerns in some churches today, but nothing like the first decades of our faith.

Some people felt that they could eat anything they wanted. These folks celebrated grace and freedom in Christ and frankly seemed to look down on "traditionalists." Their position would appear to be the more sophisticated one in the debate. Likewise, probably the same group of folks was flexible about the day of the week used for worship. What mattered most to them was that worship occurred, regardless of the day. Again, these folks represented a more sophisticated view on faith. And it appears that Paul for the most part agreed with their view.

But here was the problem for Paul: Both groups used their point of view, their convictions, as a lens through which they were able to see the other group with contempt. Regardless of which side was right or wrong, Paul knew that the underlying attitude of superiority between individuals and groups was not good for the common life and ministry of the church. So Paul addressed it.

His basic message exists in three parts:

1. Who are we to judge someone else? (Paul seems to be quoting Jesus here)
2. There is room in the church for different, faith-based, personal convictions.
3. All of us belong to the Lord (so chill out).

If these three points are true, if we really believe and practice them, then it will change us and our attitude toward other Christians; toward guests who come to our church; and toward our neighbors with all different types of beliefs. In fact, practicing these beliefs will enable us to live into what Paul wrote at the beginning of this section of his letter—"Welcome those who are weak in faith..." And that sense of welcome is often what is missing when we hesitate about going to a certain meeting. We wonder if we will feel welcome there. What will be the dominant attitude? Can I be myself safely? Or do I need just to get through the event and then leave as soon as possible without developing any sense of belonging or connection with the group.

For many folks, these questions are critically important. Dominant groups in society in general and sadly also in the church, have tried to make certain groups feel "less than." This approach can involve disparaging what others believe; silencing (or attempting to silence) their voices; and treating people who are different as outsiders. The people and groups that have been treated this way historically have done much hard work over the past several decades to change that reality in society and in the church. Progress has been made for women, racial minorities, gay and lesbian people,

immigrants, and people with mental and physical disabilities. There is still much to do, but at least the issue of what it means to welcome those who are different in those ways is more in the open.

But that is really one part of the equation. Because we can come to believe all the right things about life and justice and still have a non-welcoming attitude. We can hold people in contempt who believe the wrong things—that is, people who don't agree with me. We can gather people around us who agree with us and develop an “us and them” attitude which can feel comforting, especially in a world that is uncertain. But that approach only perpetuates division and contempt. And that is not what the gospel and the church are about. The church is to be a place where we can learn to love and grow as we worship God together and receive the grace to follow Jesus Christ.

So how can we be that type of welcoming place? Let me tell a brief story from that same training I spoke about earlier. In the midst of the smugness and the chorus of repeated shared opinions, one person got up and shared honestly about his life. He told the group what worried him about his ministry-- would he continue to be considered “edgy” enough and competent to do his demanding work? Or would he fall out of favor with the powers that be? It was the one moment over those few days when I felt connected, when I felt like I could be honest, too, at least with that person and on that subject. It was a moment of courage and shared humanity.

That's the type of attitude, the type of environment, that I want us to have here at church. We don't have to hold a constant “therapy session;” but we do need to be a place where folks can be honest, including honesty about having different points of view, and not worry if they will be ostracized or condescended to as outsiders or as someone less sophisticated in their beliefs.

Because, if we say we are followers of Jesus, we are not to judge one another. There is not really a loophole on this (believe me I know, because I have looked!). And if we believe and practice our parish mission statement that “We are a community of faith seeking to love and serve in the Spirit of Jesus Christ,” then of course people with different points of view are welcome here. As Paul wrote, we belong to the Lord and it is the Lord who judges us.

When we do disagree—and we will, whether passionately over a matter of principle; or simply over a practical decision—we have the means to navigate through our disagreement. What we need to do is prioritize common prayer; listen carefully before we react; get to know one another and seek to understand each other; and be open to different points of view. If we do that work with God's help, then we will be a welcoming place.

When we do that, we can hear from people that have been silenced in the past—and learn from their experience. We can hear from people who see things differently from us—and benefit from their perspective. And together, if we welcome people here, we can offer the world a different type of community in which people can learn to love one another and do good work in a way that glorifies God and bears witness to our faith in Christ. Amen.