

Romans 14: 1-12 "What's Your Excuse?" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/17/23

A TV weather reporter lost her job because her forecasts were never accurate. In an interview for another similar position, she was asked her excuse for why she left her last job? She replied, "The climate didn't agree with me." We are a society of excuses where it is easier to blame someone or something else instead of taking responsibility on our own, myself included. Many years ago, I was convinced that my ex-husband was losing his hearing, but he said I was imagining things. So I thought I would test the theory. I came home one night when John was in the kitchen making dinner. From the doorway, I spoke softly, "Something smells great – what are you cooking?" No response. I moved closer to the kitchen and again softly said, "What smells so good?" Again no response. I walked right up to the entryway to the kitchen and while his back was turned, I said, "Hey John, what are you making?" This time he turned around and said, "For the third time, I said spaghetti." Thus began my awareness of my steady decline in hearing as well as a general confession that whenever I have dwelled for any length of time on my own shortcomings, they gradually begin to seem mild and harmless, not at all like the glaring defects in other people. It was time to focus less on other's defects and more on what I can work on in my own life.

In our text today, Paul is addressing a community in Rome that is having a hard time with judging others while failing to take responsibility for their own actions. He intervenes in a hot conflict that threatens to split the Christian community. The situation is delicate, and Paul is never more brilliant. The surface issues have to do with the religious observance of dietary laws and holy days. Verse 2 is hopeful news to every kid who isn't a fan of vegetables including my Laia, who only eats lettuce avoiding all others. Such folks adhere to the idea that "Vegetarian" is an old Native American word which means "terrible hunter." It is true that Paul says, "The weak eat only vegetables," but before some bright young person posts this is a magnet on your refrigerator, please know that context is everything here. The Roman church was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. When it comes to diet, the Jews stuck primarily to vegetables out of religious obligation. It was difficult to obtain ritually pure supplies as well as culturally speaking, meat and wine were often used in pagan worship and believed to stimulate fleshly passions. Therefore, it was best to avoid such things. Whereas

the Jews saw themselves as maintaining a high religious principle, the Gentiles shunned such holy obligations going so far as to judge and exclude those who practiced them. The Gentiles saw the Jews as weak because they couldn't live a life of faith without restricting certain meats in their diet and the Jews saw the Gentiles as watering down the faith and not practicing God's dietary laws. Thus, Paul speaks to both parties encouraging them not to pass judgment on the other. He reminds them that they are each servants belonging to the household of another and judgment must be left to the One who really counts; God is the one who holds the office of judge. Such lessons are consistent with the texts we know all too well about Jesus discouraging the judgment of others. Judie Larson tells a story of battling a kidney stone for a couple months which finally passed. A few months later, her husband went through the same thing and she was quick to remind him, Jesus said, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.' Pretty sure Jesus wasn't talking about kidney stones but far more about the tendency of all of us to judge when that isn't our right to do so.

Paul is advising us not to get caught up in quarrels over such minor issues where there is plenty of room for differences, for diversity. If such dietary things are important to you, then fine; if they aren't, that's fine as well. Whatever the case, honor the Lord and give thanks for that. This brings us to the real issue at heart in this church and subsequently, the body of Christ. Minor quarrels can divide the body and it is only by placing his argument in Christ-centered language, that Paul can work to prevent the community from tearing itself apart. Paul is confident in the Lord and he invites each party in the dispute to join him in this confidence. The servants who are correct will be strengthened in their stand and those who have fallen into error will be lifted up so they too can stand. Either way, it is the Lord, not they themselves who is able to make them stand. Regardless of which side one may be on, not one of us is at the center. No one properly lives to him or herself, nor are they the ultimate reality and meaning of one's life. No one properly takes him or herself as the object of ultimate devotion. Nor does anyone die to themselves. No matter what illusions one may hold about themselves and their standing in the world, death unmask them all. If in death we come face-to-face with God, then the life we now lead takes on a whole new sobriety, a

whole new seriousness regarding how we choose to live out our days. Basically, Paul is saying that we all will stand before God's judgment and we are all accountable to God.

In our day, dietary laws aren't the source of contention but there are plenty of things that are, plenty of things which divide the body of Christ. There is an English proverb that says, "Faults are thick where love is thin," and likewise the opposite is true: "Faults are thin where love is thick." When there is an absence of love in the body of Christ, it follows there will be an absence of unity. Mother Teresa put it right when she said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them. And, if you love people, you have no desire to judge them." The names have all changed but a scenario from back in the early 20th century still plays out in our world today. It seems that there was a group of folks in Congress who were less concerned with their own piddling shortcomings and preferred to complain about a glaring defect in the senator from Utah, Reed Smoot. Smoot was a leader in the Mormon LDS church and back in those days, his church was accused of secretly allowing the practice of plural marriages or polygamy. Although Smoot had only one wife, some of the more sanctimonious members of the Senate argued that he shouldn't be seated, given the beliefs of his church. But the issue was settled when Senator Penrose of Pennsylvania strode to the podium and looked directly at some of his colleagues who, though married, were known to have more than one mistress on the side. He stated emphatically, "As for me, I would prefer to have seated beside me a polygamist who doesn't do polygamy than a monogamist who doesn't do monogamy." And we probably vaguely remember Jesus saying something about before trying to take the speck out of someone else's eye, we take the log out of our own.

I was in Barnes N Noble the other day waiting in line to check-out, trying to assess if I would have time to grab a bite to eat before heading back to the office. At the register was a young female with an intellectual disability who was diligently trying to count the change handed her from the cashier. The problem was it was taking a long time and initially I thought to myself, "Why now? I don't have time for this." The manager intervened to ask her to move on. This caused her to get flustered and to start over again. You know how in those circumstances you try to look away and try not to make a difficult situation worse. I was invited over to another register, but thanks to my hearing aids, because remember I'm the

one with the hearing problem, I was able to hear the adjoining conversation very well. The customer just wanted to know she got the right change. Both parties grew more and more frustrated with each other. Finally, the manager blatantly said, "You need to leave now. You've gotten your correct change according to the computer and we don't have time for you." I was instantly ashamed that I had thought the same thing just minutes ago. The customer threw down her bags and started yelling she just wanted to count her change. I stepped up and said to the customer, "Is there anything I can help with?" She turned to me and said, "This woman is trying to throw me out of the store and all I want to do is check my change." The manager retorted with a huff, "I am not." I nodded to the manager and whispered, "Let me see what I can do." The manager threw up her hands and stormed off. We stepped out of line and the customer handed me her receipt as she got out a pen. She took the pen and began doing her math. I was very impressed with her calculations and told her so. Then she carefully counted her change and then looked at me and said, "Hey, they match!" I told her she did that really well as math was never my best subject. She had calmed down, picked up her bags and thanked me. I said, "No, thank you for reminding me of the importance of slowing down and making sure I count my change correctly." She beamed and said, "You are welcome. It's important." I knew what she meant, but for me, what was really important was the opportunity to make amends for my prior judgments and lack of patience. If I don't have time to help someone such as this with a minor situation, or for that matter, help anyone dealing with small issues, what makes me think I can help with the major things?

We are so quick to blame and so very slow to self-reflect and adjust our own standards. When we judge others, we are placing our authority above God's when the reality is that we are only servants in God's household. May we reflect the love of God in Christ by living among our brothers and sisters as those who are thick with love and thin with faults.