“***Live to the Lord***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Sep. 13, 2020

**Romans 14:1–12**

1Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. 2Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. 4Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 6Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8If 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. 9For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . 12So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Christians frequently pass judgment on other Christians, and it also happened in the Apostle Paul’s time. Here in the letter to the Romans Paul advises Christians to assume that other Christians are sincere, even if they have religious practices that differ from one’s own. Some of these practices had to do with eating or abstaining from eating certain foods. We should assume that other believers either “eat in honor of the Lord,” or “abstain in honor of the Lord” (14:6). We should believe that they are sincere, and not make it an issue for fighting.

There has been a lot of religious combat within the Christian church. We see it in some of the epistles of the New Testament, and we see it still to this day. If you write a book on Christian theology or ethics, some other Christian will attack it, you can count on that. But that is to be expected, if we accept the Protestant principle, the idea that individuals can read the Bible for themselves, and seek to understand it. Would that more people understood the mandate that we be gracious and respectful, such as we see here in this passage.

Paul was dealing with Christians who had quite different backgrounds. Some of them were still devout Jews, and continued to observe the kosher food rules. Others were wisdom-oriented Gentiles who had no patience for such rules. Another group was vegetarian. You can imagine there were very different religious instincts and habits among these people, and that there were plenty of opportunities for judgmental attitudes between the groups, even though they had all become Christian. To keep the peace within the congregation, these folks would need to practice quite a bit of consideration and trust in people whom they found to be different from themselves. Paul spends the better part of four chapters (11–12, 14–15) emphasizing that they need to show consideration for each other.

This includes forgiveness, and Jesus gave some lessons on forgiveness, too. He once told Peter that he needed to be willing to forgive a member of the church seventy-seven times (Matt 18:22). And then he told the parable about the unforgiving servant, who begged his master to forgive his debt, and who was forgiven, but then refused to forgive someone who owed him much less (Matt 18:23–35). The master calls him a “wicked slave” and asks, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” (18:32–33).

So mercy is one of the fundamental attitudes that is needed in a church. Common consideration is another one. And respectful tolerance of the religious practices of others is another.

These are the basic courses in the School of Love, in which we are all freshmen. Living in families and congregations, we are being schooled in mercy, consideration, forgiveness, and tolerance, all of which are part of love. Our life experiences give us opportunities to learn these spiritual lessons. There will be many chances to forgive, or to be considerate, or to be tolerant. The basic spiritual message is simple, but putting it into practice can be difficult, because we have to go against the inertia of our material feelings and selfish thoughts. And yet, the spirit gives us energy to push against that inertia. We really can practice consideration and mercy, if we determine that we will do it. Decisions and determinations, followed through with actions, shape and re-shape us, making us more like Jesus. If we decide that we will follow Jesus, keep his commands in mind, and then ask for help at the moment when we need it, we will get the spiritual energy to succeed in doing the difficult thing: forgiving and loving, taking the long view instead of the short one. Do it in honor of the Lord, in loyalty to him and what he stands for.

We will run into some brick walls, where all our prayers and forgiveness fail to get through to someone. We are wise not to strive with others, not to butt heads or seek to force an outcome. Notice the condition that Paul puts into this statement: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18). We can’t do what’s not possible.

When we run into those brick walls, we can still ask for the mind of Christ, and become ready to serve someone else. We can always ask for “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16).

What the Christian community needs more than anything is Christ—his goodness, consideration, mercy, and spiritual liveliness. We are his students, studying his character and seeking to replicate it in our lives. The word “Christian” means “little Christ,” and although it was meant as an insult when it was coined, it is an appropriate label, since it is what we seek to become. We put into practice what we are taught, and we are re-shaped by the spiritual content of the teachings and by the Spirit poured into our hearts.

There is a generosity in Jesus that needs to be visible in anybody who claims to be a disciple. Judgmental and abusive Christians are inconsistent with Jesus himself. Such behavior is more reflective of Caesar than of Christ. If we are to be little Christs, we need to reflect his large-hearted love and consideration.

Go forth in confidence, your mind filled with good instruction, your heart empowered by the Spirit, and your will filled with Jesus’ love.