

Sept. 3, 2020
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 15
Romans 14:1-12

Our epistle readings and my sermons recently have been from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. I have found that, throughout the course of my ministry, I have had two reactions to Romans – each depending on the church I was serving at the moment. For instance, when I hear St. Paul contending with a congregation full of “Debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy” (as we heard last week) ... when I hear him address all the people who make conflict in the church ... there have been times, in previous churches, when I have said to myself, “You think *you* have it bad, Paul? You should try being pastor *here!*”

But there have been other times in other congregations when I have had the opposite reaction. I could read the same passage and say to myself, “I sure am glad I am not serving *that* church.” This is one of those times. In today's reading I hear St. Paul contending with people who were bickering over what foods were proper to be eaten. Some in the church were vegetarians. Others were carnivores. Each was passing judgment on the other. Some piously observed all the holy days and looked down on others who just figured that, hey, *all* days were holy. They would get in squabbles about these things. Paul's advice to them was to not pass judgment on one another, to let God be the judge.

And so, as I read today's epistle, I thought to myself, “I'm glad I'm not serving *that* church. These things don't apply here. People don't pass judgment on others concerning the food they eat ... unless it is your pastor kidding this congregation about its passion for spinach and lentils. We don't seem to be a judgmental bunch. We aren't a quarrelsome bunch. We don't

seem to be the type of people, generally, that St. Paul would need to admonish. So, my first thought was to not preach on this text at all and choose another one.

But then I thought again. There is an overarching theme that we will miss if we think that all Paul is talking about is food and holy days. If we look too closely at the *things* the Romans were arguing about, it will be like looking closely at trees and failing to see the forest. Paul isn't giving practical advice as much as he is giving theological, spiritual, and sacramental advice: Christ died, not to save individuals to heaven in the sweet bye-and-bye. Christ died for *community*. And Paul's theology is systematic. In baptism, each of us become members of the body of Christ. If, then, we are made one in the body of Christ, we are made one with one another. In the Kingdom of God we don't live each to ourselves. We live one *to* one another, one *for* one another.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, our Lutheran martyr, outlined this for us in his seminal book, *Life Together*. Forgive me for paraphrasing. Bonhoeffer said something like this: "God didn't make this other person the same way I would have made him. I would have created other people to dominate and control. But God created my brother so that I might see my Creator in him." Bonhoeffer said. "If I fail to see God in this person, he just becomes a nuisance. I would have created my brother in *my* own image, but God created him in *His* image. When another person looks strange and ungodly to me I must consider that I am seeing God in a new and different way because God creates every person in the likeness of His Son, the Crucified."

Looking at things that way is a challenge for me. When I ponder what it means to be created "in the image of God" (*imago Dei*) I always ponder how it is that I, myself, am an image of God. But it is rather mind-altering to turn that around and consider how the *other person* is created in the image of God: the obsessive compulsive one, the passive-aggressive one, the one who

doesn't intend to vote the same way I intend to in November. How on earth is *that* person created in the image of God?!

So, when St. Paul gives advice about how folks should get along with one another and stop judging one another – as he does throughout his letters – it isn't so much like a classroom teacher saying "behave" to her students as it is a pastor and theologian and a baptized committed believer teaching a community that it *is* community and that it *is* community because they have been made one through the death and resurrection of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. "With God," Paul is telling them, "it is not a 'I, me, and my' thing. It is a "we, our, and us" thing. We don't just live *with* one another. We live *for* one another.

And when Paul said, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female," he was saying that community is more than just the people we live with, work with, and go to school with. Living in Northern Virginia, that is something I am continually aware of and amazed about. There are so many communities within communities.

All you have to do is take a walk around the plaza and see first-hand. We have a black community here. Come early to our building and you can see Asian women doing exercise rituals out on the sidewalk. Fellowship House is home to a large Asian population plus a multitude of other nationalities. The Hispanic community in Northern Virginia is prominent. Sometimes I make the mistake of thinking of Hispanics as all from Mexico when I need to realize that, around here, we have people from Salvador, Peru, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Bolivia, and Columbia. The Northern Virginia tech corridor which runs through Ashburn is home to a huge community of Indians. I knew that there was a large community of Vietnamese in

Arlington, but I have now learned that we also have a large community of Koreans in Fairfax.

My point is that we are a community within communities. Paul is challenging us to see the *imago dei*, the image of God, in these brothers and sisters of different nationalities, languages, and races. Paul is encouraging us to go beyond tolerance to acceptance – to embrace the diversity as a gift from God. I'll say it one last time. It is axiomatic: In baptism, each of us became members of the body of Christ. If, then, we are made one in the body of Christ, we are made one with one another. In the Kingdom of God we don't live each to ourselves. We live one *to* another, one *for* another.