

### **Romans 14:1-12**

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those 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. Who 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. 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. Those 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. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. 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. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

### **“The Umpire Within”**

We often disagree about practices of faith and biblical interpretation with one another. “We” meaning those of us who proclaim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, our congregation included. We are the people Paul is speaking to in today’s text. Every Christian throughout time has needed the theological rebuke he has for us today. “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.”

Welcome has nothing to do with judging one another! Jesus himself called us to be a people of welcome, leaving no room for “quarreling over opinions,” a.k.a. judging. Paul isn’t talking about our disputes over paint colors or whether we should have purple or orange choir robes. His guidance on welcome is intended to put a lid on the umpires within each one of us who want to judge each other’s faithfulness and make the call on whether you and I are in or out on matters of ultimate importance!

The “opinions” he refers to point to our differing theological views as reflected in our religious practices. We are not the only church to disagree with one another’s theology. The earliest churches believed in variety of scriptural interpretations which lead them to carry out of the good news of Jesus Christ with differing emphases. To one the good news meant eating any meat any day they wanted to, in honor of freedom in God found in Jesus Christ. For others the good news meant moderation and the creation of sacred days and ascetic ways of living such as vegetarianism. This was considered obedience to the sacrifice of God in Jesus Christ. “One group insists on making sharp distinctions, whereas the other group sees shades of gray...one sees a crucial point at stake; the other doubts whether this one point is the single axis on which the whole religious universe turns...Paul makes no effort to harmonize them or impose uniformity...our diversity is under the scrutiny of the Lord of the living and the dead rather than under the watchful eye of those bent on making us in their own image and in their own likeness.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul usually has specific guidance for the communities he writes. Just two chapters ago he had a whole list of actions for us to follow to live in Christ. One would expect that in today's text he might have judged which group was honoring the good news and which one had passed too far from the bounds of Christian living. He gave plenty of guidance in other places in his letters. But here in today's text we find no such judgment on the community's varied practices. Paul is more interested in addressing another more alarming church matter, judgmental Christians. Christians who take judgment into their own hands thwart the good news of Jesus Christ and wreak havoc on ourselves and others as we try to keep the keys of a duty which is not ours.

Paul is addressing the "ump" within each one of us. The one armed and ready to call someone else into our understanding of the good news and our accountability system. It seems we each have a little judging beast that pops to the forefront of our minds when our own biblical interpretations and practices are challenged. This umpire begins to assess others like one with authority. But we have no such authority, only limited human vision. We don't have a small space in front of the catcher to stare at like a baseball ump does to call the pitches of others! So we construct walls and name them in our out. It's more secure this way.

There is a difference between acknowledging varying theologies and practices, and judging. Theological and practical disagreement leaves room for the other to also have a faithful response. We interpret differently, but acknowledge the room is full of people who confess a triune God and that God is judge. Judgment claims the other has fallen outside some boundary of faithful response. Joseph of Panephrisis, a fourth century desert father told those who came to seek his advice on basic Christian living, "In all circumstances say, Who am I? and do not judge anybody."<sup>2</sup>

One of our historical Presbyterian tenets sums up what Paul is saying in our passage, "God alone is Lord of the conscience."<sup>3</sup> No one else is accountable for your actions, or mine, before God. Just me alone. Just you alone. So when we are tempted to judge by our umpire within, our individual accountability to Christ puts things in perspective. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves." We live and die in Christ who is the only Lord of the dead and the living. To judge others is to arrogantly appropriate God's work and make it our own. Within the church there is room for a wide variety of theologies to be known as faithful responses to the gospel.

What Paul articulates in this text gives us guidance for dealing with different religious practices and convictions. One thing is clear. He calls the weak, who are in this text those with strict observances, and the strong, who in this text take liberties, to live in Christ together! We are not allowed to judge one another's faith in our life together. Instead we are called to WELCOME without fear all who believe. For God has welcomed them. They stand before God alone and will be upheld because God is able to make them stand. Trust in God and we will have no inner need to judge our neighbors.

We are all believers. Do not give into the umpire within. But when it happens, let us ask for mercy, and say to ourselves with the full assurance of grace, "Who am I?" instead.

Then engage your neighbor in welcome with no intention of quarreling over opinions.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, eds., *Preaching Through the Christian Year: A*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1992) 440-1.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, eds., *Resources for Preaching and Worship: Year A*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 238.

<sup>3</sup> PC (USA) Book of Order, 2004/2005, Form of Government, Historic Principles of Church Order (G-1.0301).