

Take a Big Step Back
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Romans 14:1-23 (NRSV)

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling 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.

⁵Some 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.

⁷We 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.

¹⁰Why 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. ¹¹For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God."

¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.

¹⁹Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building. ²⁰Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; ²¹it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. ²²The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.

²³But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Sermon:

Again, our lectionary selection deals with the internal ethics and practices within the early Christian church as it sorts itself out within its Jewish context. Paul's letter to the Church in Rome was written in the mid-fifties of the Common Era from Corinth just before he departed for Jerusalem to hand-carry an offering he had collected for the distressed Mother Church. Paul

wrote in hopes of establishing a relationship with the Church in Rome to use it as a base for his missionary work in Gaul, part of modern day France. Paul spent significant ink putting a positive spin on himself, his ministry, and his Christology to counter act any bad press he may have received in Rome.

In general, I and others, who tend to look at scriptures from within a sociological and cultural context as much as we do a historical and theological context, believe that Paul understood his divine call and commission and its urgency was for him to go as an authoritative, Israelite among the more Hellenistic, acculturated Israelites scattered about the Roman Empire to tell them about God's redemptive, Messianic work in the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. Peter and the other disciples were to evangelize Judean Israelites and associated God-venerators in Jerusalem and surrounding environs while awaiting the return of Jesus and the inauguration of the Kingdom on earth.

Therefore, the communities Paul went to would have been comprised of Israelites of the more traditional understandings and practices of the Mosaic laws and those acculturated in Hellenistic worldviews and less law observant. And, as was the case in many Jewish communities, there would have been non-Jewish, God-venerators, who got lumped into the category of Gentiles. However, as I have pointed out several times, the term Gentile or "ethne" in Greek can be used to identify anyone not like us or foreigners. So, for the stauncher Israelite traditionalist, a Hellenized Israelite could easily have been called an "ethne", one who lived like a Gentile, i.e. not like us. And, the more acculturated Israelite, at times, would have referred to the traditionalists, especially if they didn't or wouldn't speak Greek, as barbarians because they were unsophisticated or rejected the prevailing Greco-Roman culture.

I want to mention that the Jewish scholar, Shaye Cohen, says that Israelites living in Rome and other major cities were indistinguishable from anyone else. Jewish differences presented themselves, if at all, only in such areas as diet, holy days, and male circumcision. Although this later distinction may not have been as widely practiced as we have been led to believe or as distinctively Jewish as we may have been taught.

In Paul's missionary travels he had formed close relationships with various Israelite, Jesus-believers, such as Priscilla and Aquila of Acts 18 from Rome. These Jewish Jesus-believers had either been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius in response to civil disorders among the Israelites over their preaching about Christ or they had chosen to immigrate and avoid repercussions for their faith. All of which meant Paul was aware of certain conflicts or potential conflicts within the church at Rome.

There is no consensus among New Testament scholars and historians as to whether the Jews were actually expelled en masse from Roman between 41-57 C.E. or whether just those Jews associated with one called Chrestus were expelled and the remaining Jews were simply forbidden to assemble or hold gatherings in their houses of prayer (*proseuchai, proseuchai*) for a while after incidents of civil disorder.

The controversy that Paul addresses in our text today deals with eating foods, particularly flesh foods and wine that had been offered to pagan gods and then sold in the market places of Rome. I refresh our memory: In the ancient world Israelites and non-Israelites alike offered various kinds of sacrifices to their gods either to appease them, to ingratiate themselves, to secure blessings, or to ward off harm. Certain portions of the offerings were burned, usually the fat and fatty parts. The person and his or her family making the offering would eat certain portions, and special portions would have gone to the temple priest either to be eaten or sold in

the market place. For the Israelites, there was a precise method for slaughtering and butchering an animal that was not necessarily followed by pagans.

So, there were Israelite, Jesus-people in Rome meeting in homes or house churches, who would not compromise their Israelite dietary laws, *kashrut*, or their sabbaths or holy days. These kosher people would have looked down their noses at the more law-free, acculturated Israelites and non-Israelite Jesus-believers. The traditionalist still maintained that God's kingdom was to come on earth, restore Israel to its former glory beginning in Jerusalem and the holy land, and they would be called back and ensconce in the kingdom along with all the other devout Israelite followers of the Mosaic Laws and traditions. The acculturated Israelites held a more universal view of the kingdom and it was not restricted to Judea and Jerusalem or any expectation of ever going to Jerusalem.

Also, the less kosher and more law-free Israelites and non-Israelites Jesus-believers would have looked at the traditionalist as rather backward, ignorant, or superstitious because how could food offered to an idol spiritually taint a person - dumb! Paul calls those traditionalists; those Israelites still loyal to strict Mosaic traditions "weak", meaning they had not fully grasped the depth of freedom of God's work in Christ. Those who eat with gratitude whatever is set before them are strong, even if they eat in the home of a non-believer or pagan so long as the meal is in and of itself is not a pagan, cultic meal. To this point, the dimensions of a personal and collective, spiritual relationship with God in Christ goes well beyond the merits of certain outmoded Israelite traditions. These terms "weak" and "strong" may not have been Paul's invention but commonly used in various Jesus-believing communities at the time, especially among the status conscious Hellenistic, Christian communities in Rome and other major cosmopolitan areas.

The vegetables referred to in our text today were most likely simply produce grown specifically for the sale in the markets and served along with the agape or love meal when the church gathered in someone's home or a house church for worship. So, these folks may not have been vegetarians in the strictest sense and may have actually eaten meat and drank wines that were kosher in their own homes or the homes of like-minded believers.

Obviously, we gather that Paul, as a highly educated, acculturated Hellenistic Israelite, one of the strong who believed he and people like him could eat anything but not everything sold in the market place without fear of symbolic, spiritual contamination. Now, some will say that here in Romans chapter 14-15 Paul throws out all the dietary laws for the Jews. I don't agree and I think I am in good company. What I think we see here is Paul addressing fellow Israelites - traditionalist and the acculturated - concerning their eating only those foods permitted in the book of Leviticus that were sold in pagan markets and may have been offered to idols. I don't hear Paul saying anywhere that Jesus-Israelites are now authorized to eat pork, shell fish, etc., do you? I mean Paul doesn't mention Jews going to Bubba's BBQ for pork sandwiches and ribs, or an evening out at Red Lobster. Such distinctions for the pagan God-venerators and non-Israelite Jesus-believers would not have been or would ever be an issue, all though some may have been kosher.

So, therein is the context. Paul, as a learned, Hellenistic influenced Pharisee, assumes the authoritative position of a specialist in this matter and gives advice and insights that are aimed at bringing all factions together or insuring that all factions stay together around a common identity in Christ, even as he chastises and exhorts all parties involved.

Well, we Christians today, except for our brothers and sisters in the Seventh-Day Adventist, obviously don't have any serious religious reservations about what the foods we eat or

the day we set aside for worship. Some may have some reservations about drinking wine, can't violate the 11th Commandment. Yet, I think when we look at the symbolic dimensions of our faith, we still have many hang-ups.

I want to stress the importance of symbols and the symbolic. Symbols, whether physical objects or not, participate in and connect individuals and communities to a mysterious and transcendent reality beyond the physical object. A blindfolded woman holding balanced scales, a national flag, and a cross are all symbols that connect people to certain mysterious realities.¹ To desecrate any of these objects is to violate certain realities held holy or sacred. Thus, the Israelite dietary laws were more than just ethnic peculiarities, they were symbolic participations in the mysterious realm of the holy on earth.

Paul, points out that regardless of faction, all have been called into and received, that is welcomed by God - granted holy, hospitality in Christ - into the household of God. Therefore, all are to be welcomed into the homes of those hosting Christian gatherings with no strings attached. The "strong" or more law-free are not to invite and welcome the "weaker" or the more Mosaic observant into their house church just for the opportunity to debate their differences or to snipe at or denigrate them. Each person, be they acculturated or not, has been called into holy relationship by God. God is the final arbitrator of their faith and its sincerity, not human institutions and traditions.

Those people, who observe certain customs, certain days, abstain from certain foods, and follow traditional Judean purity norms, and even insist on circumcision for converts (15:8), are participating symbolically in things they believe holy and should be respected by others and vice versa. Furthermore, inviting people into one's house church, whom you know to differ in beliefs and practices, and purposely doing things that will offend them is not only to disrespect them as an invited guest but is to offend the body of Christ that gathers and the one who convenes the gathering - the Holy Spirit of God. Furthermore, Paul indicates that a believer should not go into another's house as an invited guest and start criticizing and dictating "oughts" and "shoulds". I mean if you go to someone's house knowing they are going to serve something not kosher, you have no one to blame but yourself, and furthermore, you bring as much pain into your life and the world when you take offense in such cases as you do when you give offense.

In a more contemporary context - as a kosher person you don't go to a country where pork is one of the major meats served and wine a common beverage, even served in certain church observances and complain.

I have been a part of community religious gatherings at Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Memorial Day, etc., where the featured preacher or even the hosting church went out of their way to make a case for their unique faith understandings and practices in contrast to others in the congregation. In those cases, I was not offended so much as saddened by the shallowness of such people and their understanding of God's divine work in Jesus. Yet, how dare they invite people, whom they knew were of different Christian faith stances and practices, into their house of God and treat them so disrespectfully. I don't think such folks or their preachers had read and truly understood today's text.

Therefore, those Christians, who denigrate fellow Christians over such human traditions as baptism, veneration of icons, or who serve real wine for communion, etc. need to take one big step back, remembering that many of the things that are divisive and hurtful in the body of

¹ Patte, Daniel, "Symbolism", Vol. 5, *The New Interpreter's™ Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2009

Christ, one must die to prove, especially given that those in Christ will stand before the final arbiter of our faith to be judged by whether we loved our neighbors as ourselves.

To paraphrase the Apostle Paul, ¹⁶ So, fellow Christians do not allow your religious practices and beliefs to become intentionally hurtful and harmful to the body of Christ. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not food and drink or a bunch of human religious traditions but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and [should have] human approval. ¹⁹ Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building and not spend so much time, energy, and money on what is divisive, destructive, and alienating.

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