



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Mutual Upbuilding Romans 14:13-23

Fr. William Klock

September 2, 2018 – Trinity 14

A number of years ago we went up to Kelowna to spend time with Veronica's dad while he was in hospital. I was excited to try out his new snowblower. He lived on a hill and earlier that year the city had redesigned the curve of the road past his house. They cut away a big part of the hill and built a retaining wall about twenty-five feet high, then built him a new driveway along the top of the retaining wall. It was steep so he bought a snowblower to clear it. The snow was deep. I fired up the snowblower. It was self-propelled and had big, knobby tires that took it right up the steep driveway without a problem, a clean swath of asphalt in its wake and a steady stream of snow blasting over the retaining wall. This was the way to clear snow! And then I got to the top, turned around, and saw a man standing angrily at the bottom of the driveway. He had snow on his head, he has now on his clothes... he had snow inside his collar. While I was blasting away the snow on the driveway, the snowblower was throwing it all down on the sidewalk—and pedestrians—at the bottom of the retaining wall. Oops!

Brothers and Sisters, sometimes we do the same thing spiritually. We struggle through things—as Paul has told us we need to do. We sort out various issues of life in light of Jesus and his cross. We get things figured out. And then we power through the Christian life, often with disregard for fellow Christians who haven't worked out the things we've worked out or, maybe, they've worked them out a little differently and we leave them floundering in our wake. We've

found our footing and we've cleared our own path, but—sometimes—in the process we make the path more difficult for a brother or sister: offending their scruples, driving them away from fellowship, and maybe even causing them to question faith in Jesus.

We often talk about living the Christian life and following Jesus as “walking” and with that in mind, Paul addresses this problem in terms of putting stumbling blocks and hindrances in the paths of others—things that actually make it harder for them to walk with Jesus. Have you ever thought about that? It's good to sort things out and think things through in light of the cross. It's good to figure out how to apply the life of Jesus and the Spirit to how we do *this* or how we live *that*. But then what we do with that or how we put it into practise, particularly around other Christians, has the potential to set them back or trip them up. Paul reminds us that we don't follow Jesus alone. We're part of a whole body of people following with us and we need always to be considering them. This is something we especially need to hear in light of the cultural of individualism in which we live and that even dominates our modern churches..

Look at what Paul has to say in Romans 14:13.

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Paul has just said that each of us will give an account to God. So now, since God will be the judge, let's stop passing judgement on each other. Paul gets “punny” with his Greek and it's almost impossible to translate it well into English, especially since we tend to associate “judging” with a negative activity. But he's saying this, “Stop passing judgement on each other. If you're so keen on exercising your judgement, exercise it on this:

figure out how to avoid placing stumbling blocks and hindrances in the paths of your brothers and sisters.”

Remember the two issues that Paul highlighted in the first part of Chapter 14. The first was the issue of eating meat. In Greek and Roman cities most of the meat that was for sale came from the temples. People took animals to be sacrificed and then the meat was sold. The temples were basically the butcher shops. This might have been an issue for some converts from paganism who didn't want the association with their past pagan ways, but it was mostly a problem for Jews. According to their dietary rules, this was unclean meat. Many of them would have simply opted to be vegetarians in order to avoid unclean meat.

The other issue Paul raised was the observance of feasts and holy days. This was another issue of importance to Jews and many Jewish converts continued to observe the Sabbath and the Jewish holy days. Paul writes about these people with scruples as being weak in the faith and he warns the strong not to look down on them and for the weak not to judge the strong.

These aren't make or break issues. Paul is clear that there is a right and a wrong answer in each case, but what you eat or what holy days you celebrate should not be a reason for disunity in the church or for Christians to be judging each other. Think again of the two friends I mentioned last time. Both came from very unchristian backgrounds and are now whole-heartedly devoted to following Jesus. One won't touch alcohol and thinks drinking is a sin. The other gets together with his Christian brothers on the church's feast days to sing drinking songs and to raise a glass to the King. Both are seeking to honour the Lord and, Paul would say, neither should judge or scorn the other. Just the opposite, they should be united in their worship and service of God,

because they're both brothers in Christ.

We're oh-so prone to judging each other in situations like that and Paul knows it. He saw the church in Rome fragment, particularly as Nero lifted his ban on Jews in the city. The Jews refused to eat meat that had been through the pagan temples and they observed the Sabbath and holy days. Whether it was the Jewish believers who refused to sully themselves by worshipping with the Gentile believers or the Gentile believers who made the Jewish believers feel unwelcome, they had split up and formed their own worshipping communities. Paul was appalled. Jesus had unified them and for them to split up, worshipping apart and forming separate communities was to undermine the gospel itself. And so he urged them all: stop judging each other and apply your judging skill to figuring out how not to trip each other up. He goes on in verse 14:

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

Jesus, we read in Mark's Gospel, said that it's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but what comes out. Meat—clean or unclean—goes in one end and out the other. It's the unclean things that come out of a person that make them unclean. Paul knew what Jesus had said. He'd spent years thinking on it. He'd spent years working through what Jesus and his cross meant for the faith in which he'd been raised. This is the sort of thinking through that Paul encourages everyone to do when tells us to reason things out. He'd done it and he understood that for the Christian, there's no such thing as unclean meat. But here's the key: Not everyone has done that reasoning and not everyone has worked that issue out for themselves. It was still a problem for many Jewish believers. And Paul

explains: If you believe it's unclean, then for you it's unclean.

Now, this isn't Paul giving up on the idea of absolute truth or anything like that. What he's getting at is the idea of violating one's conscience. Something may be perfectly fine to do, but if you believe that thing is a sin—an act of rebellion against God—then for you to do that thing is for you to rebel against God, at least in your heart, if not in actual deed. Paul is *not* saying that this mistaken brother or sister shouldn't continue to work things out or that he or she doesn't need further teaching. He's concerned about what's going on right now. And so he says:

For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:15-17)

Paul is envisioning Jewish Christians in Rome, who still have scruples about things like diet, Sabbath, and circumcision, looking on as their Gentile brothers and sisters feast on meat purchased from the temple butcher shops. They might be appalled and it just might be enough to send them packing right back to the synagogue. If that's how these Christians act—and they knew that these people were associates of Paul—if that's how they act, well, forget Jesus and everything to do with him! Jesus died for these people, but these “strong” Christians, in exercising their freedoms without thought for others are putting stumbling blocks in their path. Ironically, the Christians who are strong and who have sorted out these issues and really do know the right answers, have ended up putting themselves as loggerheads with Jesus himself. Being right is important.

Sorting through these often-complex issues really is important. Paul really does write about the people who have done this as the “strong” ones and the ones with the scruples who have not as the “weak”. But sometimes there are things that are more important than being right. Sometimes we can be right, but as we charge ahead with our snowblower we end up burying someone else in the aftermath without even realizing it.

Sometimes love comes before being right and exercising our freedoms. Again, Paul isn't saying that the weaker Christians should stay weak. He urges everyone to work these things out in light of the cross. He urges everyone to maturity. But that means that the strong need to bear with the weak in patient love. There's a place for teaching and discipleship, yes, but there's also a place for setting aside our liberties for the sake of the spiritual well-being of others. The way people argue over some of these non-essential issues, you might think that they're what the kingdom is all about, but Paul reminds us: The kingdom isn't about eating and drinking. The kingdom is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. He summarises 5:1-5:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

That's God's kingdom. Those are its characteristics and priorities. Paul is clear that there's a battle for every

square inch of this world and for every second of our time in it. It's a battle between sin and grace. In light of that we need to get our priorities straight. The kingdom—righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit—needs to be our first priority. Everything else, no matter how good or how right, needs to take second place. In comparison to the Gospel, what we eat and what we drink should rate pretty low. If you're driving away a brother or splitting up the church by insisting on your rights, your priorities are horribly wrong.

We need to remember whom we're serving. We don't serve ourselves. We serve Jesus. Jesus is in the business of setting us free from all sorts of bondage, including bondage to all sorts of legalisms, but his business first and foremost is about redeeming sinners. That needs to be our primary business too. Setting people straight on secondary issues and even exercising our own rights fall somewhere down the list of priorities. Look at verse 18:

Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

We serve Christ. He died to give us peace and he gave us his Spirit to build us up in the faith—to mature us. It's essential that we judge our actions against those priorities.

If that wasn't clear enough already, Paul goes on to put another coat of paint on his argument. Look at verses 20-21:

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

He's urged us to pursue what makes for peace and builds others up. That should be our priority, because that's God's priority and we see it in the life and ministry of Jesus. And so he puts it very bluntly: Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. We need to keep this admonition in mind whenever we're dealing with secondary and non-essential issues. If we had, we'd see far fewer divisions in the church. Paul saw Jewish believers going off and forming their own worshipping communities because they insisted on eating a certain way and celebrating certain holy days—and it seems that the "stronger" believers were partly to blame. It still happens today. Christians separate to form churches centred on ethnic identity, but even worse is the consumer culture we've built in the modern Western Church, where we split endlessly over unimportant matters of personal taste and style. Paul shouts a resounding "No". Don't drive fellow believers away from Jesus and don't destroy the unity of the Church over these non-essentials. The strong should never run roughshod over the weak and the weak need to refrain from judging the strong. Both need to mature into Christ-likeness in their own ways.

And so, in verse 22, he addresses the strong believers who have worked these things out:

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

Paul's saying, "Good for you! It's a good thing to understand how Jesus frees us from legalism. It's good to understand how love and grace apply to how we live. But...make sure you also work out how to apply that love and grace to your brothers and sisters who are still working it out. He goes on in verse 23:

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Don't put your weaker or less mature brother or sister in a situation that compromises his or her faith. Don't cause him to do something he considers sinful even if you know that that thing really isn't sinful. Don't bury your sister with snow as you clear your own path.

What we eat and drink and what holy days we celebrate aren't significant issues for most Christians today, but that doesn't mean we don't have our own host of non-essentials that cause divisions and hard feelings. Paul is clear elsewhere that there are times for Christians to be discerning. Unrepentant sinners are to be excluded from the Church—not as some kind of vindictive punishment, but in the hopes that they will repent and return. We are to have nothing to do with those who preach false gospels. But when it comes working through these non-essentials as we live together with our brothers and sisters, our priority should be maintaining the unity Jesus has given us. That means dealing with each other with grace and love, the stronger not scorning the weaker and the weaker not judging the stronger. We need to get our priorities right. Paul reminds us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and his kingdom and working to fulfil the mission he's given us. Those are the essentials and nothing less important should interfere with that. If something does get in the way of that mission, we need to pause and reconsider what we're doing—because we've probably gone off-track.

Paul hinted in verses 10-12 that judgement was coming. God was coming to judge the ancient pagan world on account of its idolatry. The day was coming when every knee would bow and every tongue would give praise to God. But with it would

come persecution. Paul knew hard times were coming and that the church would be challenged. Would the Roman Christians stand or fall? He was concerned that they be ready to meet that challenge and what he's doing here is reminding them that they're not just a bunch of individuals, each following Jesus in his or her own way and then meeting up on Sundays for some feel-good time. They were a corporate community—a *family*—and it was only by maintaining that corporate and familial bond that they would survive the fires of persecution.

Brothers and Sisters, history repeats itself. Once again, we find ourselves living in a pagan and idolatrous culture that is becoming increasingly hostile to the gospel. Will we stand together as the unified family that Jesus has made us? Will we stand together to proclaim and to live out the good news that Jesus, crucified and risen, is Creation's true Lord? Will we live together in love and grace, not seeking our own agendas, rights, and freedoms, but living peaceably with each other and working for our mutual edification and maturity? When we see a brother or sisters fall, will we be there to help them up and to limp alongside them? When a brother or sisters is offended, are we prepared to humble ourselves and seek forgiveness and restoration? Dear Friends, it's not just our effectiveness in carrying out our mission to proclaim the gospel that is at stake, but the very life of the Church that *should* authenticate our gospel proclamation. We're not just called to proclaim that Jesus saves and that he is Lord; we are also called in our unity and love for each other to witness the Spirit-filled life of his kingdom.

Let us pray: We prayed in the Collect for an increase in faith, hope, and love. We ask again, Father, that in faith we might let go of non-essentials and take firm hold of Jesus and Jesus alone; that in hope we might live not for that which is passing away, but for your

kingdom; and that in love, we might offer ourselves as living sacrifices, living out the love that you have shown us in the gift of your Son as a sacrifice for our sins. Increase in us faith, hope, and love, we ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.