

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.13.20

Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.³ 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.⁴ 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.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.⁶ 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.⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.⁸ 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.⁹ For 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 judgement seat of God.¹¹ For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (305)

The day is surely coming when gathering for worship outside won't be all that pleasant. The day is surely coming when it's cold and rainy, or cold and windy, or just plain cold, most of the time, and we'll need to have made a decision: will we worship indoors with many restrictions, or will we worship on Zoom with its frustrating limitations, or will we do some combination of the two?

The day is surely coming, then, when appointed people in the congregation are going to decide which it's going to be.

I've asked around among the other churches of our denomination in the Berkshire Association as to their policies and plans.

In Sheffield, their building is closed for the foreseeable future as they worship via Zoom.

1st Church, Williamstown is continuing remote worship until there's widespread vaccination and the church is able to install a purification system in the church's HVAC ductwork.

North Adams is worshipping on-line until mid-October, waiting to see whether the opening of schools and the return of college kids bring an uptick in COVID numbers. And, whenever they do return to the sanctuary, it may involve a hybrid model, offering the in-person worship via Zoom for those who don't feel comfortable coming back to the sanctuary. But this requires

experimenting with computer/camera set-ups. So, they've talked about possibly alternating weeks of in-person worship with Zoom worship. For example, 1st and 3rd Sundays via Zoom, and 2nd and 4th Sundays in-person. They don't know about 5th Sundays.

That hybrid model is working fairly well in Tyringham and Richmond, where the congregations are each half in person, masked and distanced and with windows and doors wide open, and half on Zoom, where the risk is lowest but so's the gratification. This all might change, though, when the weather is very cold, and wide-open-windows-and-doors is more uncomfortable than being together is gratifying. As for now, there's no sung music. There are no unison prayers or responsive readings.

And all this is very stressful, said one member among the hybrid-model churches, of which 1st Church, Pittsfield, is also one. Everything takes at least a half an hour to set up, sound-checks, mic-checks, hope for a stable connection from the pulpit. There are so many components to think about, not to mention everyone's safety.

In Hinsdale, the congregation has been holding in-person, indoor worship since June 7th, observing state guidelines including marking off pews to ensure social distancing, requiring face coverings, providing disinfecting wipes for people to wipe down pews when they leave, and receiving the offering in a basket that sits on a table. Worship is abbreviated, lasts about 25 minutes, and there are no bulletins, hymns, or unison prayers. Windows and doors are open the whole time, and people exit one pew at a time.

In Lee, there is indoor, in-person worship, with the state-mandated capacity of twenty-five, so a reservation is required, to be made by Thursday of that week. When you arrive at the church, you are required to wear a face mask, entering through either the front door or back door and, if necessary, lining up outside, socially distanced, until you're called in. Ushers are there to check you in, take your temperature, and offer you a bulletin once you've each used hand sanitizer. Pews are marked as to availability, ensuring households remain six feet apart. During the service of worship, your mask must remain in place, you must not sing, and you should only whisper during unison prayers or responses. There's no passing of the peace, taking of the offering, or holding hands. Whatever prayer requests you might have need to have been called in by Thursday to the church office. There can be no congregational socializing in the building following worship. The service is also available on YouTube for those who can't get a reservation or prefer to stay home, where the

restrictions are just as real, only different, so they're lucky to have someone nearby on-call to engineer the production of that.

In all cases except those offering just Zoom worship, the congregation is never all together, is always divided into smaller-numbered gatherings, smaller than already small-in-number congregations, as most congregations in the Berkshires are—small in number, and now in even smaller number.

I can relate to Paul's worry about keeping his congregations together—like the Roman church, the one he was addressing in the letter we just heard from.

The Roman church was likely a bifurcated place. This was true of all the earliest congregations of the Church, many of which Paul founded, more of which he addressed in his several letters that survive to this day as the bulk of the New Testament. Living, traveling, and writing as a Jewish convert to the Jesus way in the years 35-55 or so, Paul embodied that bifurcation—born a Jew, become a Pharisee, converted to the Jesus Way to found congregations that would consist of Jewish Christians and, more and more, Gentile Christians. As the movement grew and spread, the body of believers would be less and less Jewish, would be more and more Gentile, which was no easy trick. Getting both groups into the same religious practice, getting two distinct peoples to be as of one body: this was no easy trick.

Always complicated, this was complicated in Rome in a particular way. Late in the prior decade, anti-Jewish sentiment was running high in the capital city, until eventually there came the Edict of Claudius. With this, the emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. This, because of a disturbance said in ancient historical texts to have been instigated by a certain “Chrestus,” but which was likely a disagreement over Christus, that is a dispute among Jews and Jewish Christians about the nature of Jesus, whether or not he was the Christ. For this, both sorts of Jews would now be expelled, leaving in Roman churches just Gentile Christians. But early in the following decade, Nero succeeded Claudius as emperor, and he rescinded the edict of expulsion. This meant Jews were now returning to the city. This also meant Roman churches were once again comprised of Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. And *this* meant that, for a while it was simply easier to be together because everyone was alike, but now it was more difficult once again, trying to manage that old trick of being two distinct peoples yet now as of one body.

This time, though, one of those distinct peoples had recently suffered the trauma of deportation and dispossession, and then return and reintegration.

It was a mess. It was very, very difficult. And for all of this mess, Paul wrote his magnum opus, the Letter to the Romans—a great masterpiece born of great trouble. Thank God he was up to the task.

At this point in the letter, where we are in our hearing, we're past the complicated and foundational theology. We're down to brass tacks.

There would be those who couldn't eat many common foods; Jewish Law prohibited such things. There would be those who could eat anything and everything; Gentile custom was pretty freewheeling.

There would be those for whom one day of the week is better than all others; Jewish Law clearly favored the Sabbath as the highest day. There would be those for whom any day and every day is pretty much the same; Gentile custom didn't concern itself with this timescale.

There would be those whose practice was so externalized and formal that they could be considered "weak" in the faith; they must not be allowed into the Church simply for the sake of arguing with them, but because the "little ones" in the faith are to be favored, the newest ones to the movement bringing fresh chance for truth revealed anew and old, crusty relationships to be freed of their crust. There would be those whose practice could hardly be discerned, so internalized was it as far as pieties and formalism; they must not think that this indicates they're higher in the faith. No, because their long-standing in the faith and their familiarity with the way and their comfort with the customs are all misleading of the higher truth that something of mystery and the very unknown is to be at work here. We're all as strangers in the Church. We're all new in this ever-mysterious faith. We're all guests of the true host, Jesus Christ. Get comfortable, but don't too comfortable.

Really, the bottom line was (and is) that everything has its place in the Lord. That a way of faith might be fitting for one sort need not suggest itself as the only way, fitting for every sort. That a practice of devotion might be felt as imperative and true by this group need not be felt to mean that such a thing is imperative and true for all.

But how do you keep it all together? What's the limiting principle, here? How do you keep it all in the same room?

It was a mess.

It still is.

A church building should be of stone and stained glass. A church building should be plain, wood clapboard, clear windows. Church music should be played on the organ and sung by a choir, preferably in Latin. Church music should be without instrumentation, without even harmony, in the common language of the people. Church music should be contemporary, of the time, electric guitars, a rock beat. Church liturgy should be from the book, nearly unchanging week to week. Church liturgy should be chosen from any number of sources, or should be spontaneous, or should be simple silence, for how can you improve on that?

To be honest, I love the many modes of glorifying God. I love that the church has become such a pouring forth of forms. I love that there's an Anglican Church, a Pentecostal Church, a Black Church, a Mainline Church. I don't find this dispersal of grace manifest emblematic of a problem. The contradictions prove the gracious and timeless truth. I don't think agreement or uniformity is what we're to be about or what God would have us be about.

And yet.

There comes a time when it's more zero-sum. There comes a time when to do it one way means not to do it lots and lots of other ways. You can't have a stone-and-stained-glass church while also having a white clapboard meetinghouse. There are architectural attempts at such a thing. America's Gilded Age here in the northeast left us with quite a few of these attempts—country “cottages” with an Italianate flair stitched onto a Queen Anne mansion, or a Persian fortress set atop the Hudson River. They're impressive. They're a little foolish. You can't have everything, not even in America. You've simply got to choose, and then you've got to devote yourself to your choice, for where your heart is there your treasure is also, which means if you don't devote yourself to anything, you won't know the occurrence of actual treasure.

For five months now, we've been taking it week to week. With all the once settled decisions of how to be together as a people suddenly unsettled, suddenly upset, there was a surprising freedom to move.

We tried preaching by podcast, and then Zoom for prayer and fellowship.

Then we discovered that Zoom could be for both preaching and prayer, the delay on that discovery being mine as I figured I'd hate preaching into a camera and really, *really* didn't want to

be on YouTube. But, on Zoom, you all were on the receiving end of that preaching-into-a-camera, live though on-line. So, it would do for a few weeks.

Then the weather turned and being outside would be pleasant, and even better than pleasant, would indeed be perfect. And it has been often perfect—freeing of so many expectations of how things *should* be, accepting instead of how things are in this moment (sunny, cloudy, windy, still, hot, cool, rainy). It's also been a relief from the pandemic as risk of transmission outdoors is minimal. It's almost felt like normal times, but with this dollop of delight, summer camp church or something.

But the days are surely coming when summer will have ended but the pandemic will have not—and we need to decide on things that will indeed be zero-sum.

There are those who hate Zoom because it's disembodied and merely notional. It doesn't embrace you the way being in the sanctuary does, your embodiment joined with the embodiment of others, just as Paul imagined the Church, one body of many members. Our history housing us, the great cloud of witnesses whose stewardship of the sanctuary makes possible our gathering manifest in the curated and cared for beauty. Zoom instead but plays out before your eyes, one more flashing of lights on the screen.

There are those who love Zoom because it frees you from worry about getting sick or getting others sick. It frees you from the mask and the reticence about touch. It makes possible the seeing of one another's faces, which we can hardly do in the pews when we don't need to wear masks, to say nothing of when we do need to wear masks. It makes possible the hearing of one another as people who find hearing in the sanctuary hard can make accommodation for themselves—earbuds, noise-canceling headphones, or even the computer's Bluetooth set to your hearing aids for reception. And come foul weather, there's not the risk of going out in it. It also takes less time—though efficiently of time shouldn't be much of an aim in worship.

There are those who miss the sanctuary, as I do, sorely. I'll say, especially on this Sunday, which marks the closing of my 19th year in Monterey, I miss that sanctuary with a longing I haven't felt in years and have never felt about a building. But it's true of both sanctuaries, the one in the dale of Monterey and the one on the hill in Lenox—their worn beauty, their hard and hearty gathering in. I go sit in them sometimes and realize what those verses from the exile meant, when the people Judah were away from their Temple: “By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and

there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”

We’ve got it relatively good compared to them, those exiled of old. Our sanctuaries survive our absence from them. We aren’t foreigners in a foreign land, deported and dispossessed. But the fact remains that, however we move into fall and winter, whether we return to our sanctuary or we return to Zoom or we settle upon some combination of the two, we are not going to return to how it used to be—not for a long time yet. I keep telling the boys, even if they do return to school for in-person learning, they won’t be returning to the school they left in March. That school is gone to them, at least for the next several months, maybe year. So, the options available to us are each disappointing in their own way, though some perhaps more disappointing to you than some others.

We have to stay with it. We have to stay together. Our fair-weather church is going to become something more trying. But we’re people of the cross. As such, we know that the cost of discipleship is high. We know also, if we’re honest, that we’ve almost never been made to pay it. Pandemic, though, is one occasion for self-giving, sacrificial love; to behave as if we are indeed our brother’s keeper, our sister’s keeper. Our practice, long-standing, here proves its perfection—or not.

I understand Paul’s worry here.

See how the Church withstood, though. Two millennia later, here yet we are and forward yet together we move.

Thanks be to God.