

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon

September 11, 2011

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

“Indifferent Things. And Not.”

Pastor John Guthrie

Two men riding on a bus, Bill and Joe, strike up a conversation, and the conversation eventually ends up turning to religion. “Are you a Christian?” Bill asks. “Yes,” replies Joe. Bill exclaims: “Great, me too; what kind of Christian are you? Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant?” Joe replies, “Protestant.” “Me too,” says Bill. “What kind of Protestant? Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal?” Joe replies, “Pentecostal.” Bill becomes even more excited. “Me too; are you an initial evidence or third wave Pentecostal?” “Initial evidence” replies Joe. “Me too, exclaims Bill.” What kind of initial evidence? Are you an AOG, CRC, COC, or CCC initial evidence Pentecostal?” “AOG” replies Joe. Bill's enthusiasm peaks. “Me too! Are you a premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial initial evidence AOG Pentecostal?” Joe replies “Amillennial.” Bill's enthusiasm suddenly deflates. “Oh, I'm so sorry,” he says. I'm afraid you're doomed.”

Bill and Joe illustrate very well one of Paul's concerns with the church in Rome, to which he is writing. In this passage, Paul wrestles with the question of how Jesus-followers from different cultures and backgrounds are to live together in one Christian community. Today, when I use the word community, please be thinking of a *Christian* community, a particular church. Like, for example, Community Presbyterian Church of Cedar City.

Paul addresses two concrete differences that could be causing friction in the Roman churches. It's not possible to tell if these differences were major concerns for Paul, or if he was simply giving the Romans two issues that he knew had caused problems in other churches.

At any rate the two issues at hand were these. First, is it OK or not for Christians to disregard the dietary restrictions in the ancient Law of Moses? And second, is it OK or not to disregard the special feasts and festivals that are prescribed in that same Law? So immediately we see that the problems already present in the Roman churches, or the ones that Paul anticipates, are those that naturally arise between Jewish and Gentile Jesus-followers. Jewish Christians would probably have followed the dietary and festival commandments from their childhood, and these practices would be central to their understanding of proper religious observance.

On the other hand, Gentile Jesus-followers would not have observed these practices, and probably would have questioned why they were necessary. We know that questions like these had at one time threatened the unity of the churches in Galatia. Just read Paul's letter to the Galatians.

By the way, when you are reading that letter, note very carefully the invective, revilement, and vitriol that Paul lays on those in Galatia who were demanding strict adherence to the Jewish Torah. Paul's anger with these people is deep, tangible, and even violet. Why is that important? Because you and I must remember that Paul was passionate about many beliefs and practices in the churches to which he wrote. We should not gather from today's reading that Paul thought *everything* was OK in the belief and practice of churches. He most certainly did not.

What we should gather, however, is that there are *some* beliefs and practices that are of no importance. And in particular, they are of so little importance that the Romans, and we, cannot allow them to threaten the unity of our church. The unity of the church is more important than what Paul

considers to be petty concerns. Among these, for the Romans, is whether or not to follow the Jewish dietary restrictions or annual festivals.

Very early in the history of the church, a term was coined to describe those beliefs and practices that were not critical to the faithfulness of the church. That term comes from the Greek language, and is *adiaphora*. It simply means, things that are not essential to the faith. Things of little or no consequence. Things that must not be allowed to cause division and disunity in the church.

Paul writes, "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." he also writes, "Some judge one day (that is a festival day) to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord."

The important thing is not so much whether we observe the practice or not, but whether we do or don't in honor of the triune God.

Note that Paul twice asks the question in this passage, "Who are you to pass judgment on your brother or sister?" In verse 10 he writes, "For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. So then, each of us will be accountable to God."

You and I know very well that we must have and do have standards of belief and practice as Christ-followers. In fact, Paul is among the foremost detailers of those beliefs and practices. Remember from last week's reading in Matthew, the four-step procedure the church is to follow in dealing with a sister or brother who has injured another in the community. We must have and do have standards of faith and practice.

Paul simply wants us to be careful that we don't confuse non-essential beliefs and practices, that is *adiaphora*, with ones that are essential. So we come to the hard part of this lesson. How do we know which beliefs and practices are essential, and which ones aren't?

Allow me to run by you a list of issues that divide us, one from another, today. Before I commence that list, be fully aware that I am not going to try to define for you which ones are essential and which ones are not. The point of running through the list is for you to ask yourself that question.

So here we go. In this Christian community which we know as Community Presbyterian Church, are Republicans welcome? What about Democrats? What about Independents? What about tea party enthusiasts? What about those who think the tea party has things completely wrong? What about those who support the policies of the current administration? And what about those who adamantly oppose them? What about those who believe governments have a moral obligation to provide for the basic needs of their people, and what about those who believe governments exist for a much more restrictive set of reasons.

What about those who believe that adherents of other faiths deserve our charity and welcome. What about those who believe other religious faiths threaten us and our values? What about those who support some form of universal health care, and what about those who oppose it vigorously? What about those whose concern for the environment leads them to oppose much industrial development? And what about those who believe the economic vitality of our nation supersedes environmental concerns.

What about those who believe women should be able to exercise reproductive freedom? And what about those who oppose fetal abortion under nearly all circumstances? What about those who believe there should be no restriction on the participation of gay and lesbian individuals in the worship and life

of the church? And what about those who view homosexual practice in any form as sin? What about those who view the participation of women in church leadership as forbidden by scripture, and what about those whose reading of scripture reveals no such prohibition? What about those in general who lean to a very literal reading of the Bible. And what about those whose reading is not literal?

What about those who believe in a more or less literal seven day creation? And what about those who subscribe to the theory of species evolution? What about those who believe scripture calls us to care for everyone, and what about those who believe the scriptural imperative to care for others is more restricted?

The list continues. Remember that it is not my purpose to state whether any of these issues is *adiaphora* or not. I pose the list for you to think about. Do we want to exclude from our fellowship any adherents on one side or the other of these issues? Are any of these issues so important that we should exclude someone because of the stand that she or he takes on them? I leave the question with you.

Before I close today I wanted to place before you one issue that is most definitely NOT *adiaphora*, one issue that is not indifferent. And that one comes from our Matthew reading. Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how many times must I forgive a sister or brother who sins against me. Is seven times enough?" Jesus replies, "No, I tell you. Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Some translations have seventy *times* seven times.) We are to forgive without limit. Forgiving is NOT *adiaphora*.

There is not time today for us to consider this lesson deeply, but allow me to make a few quick observations. Note that the reason we are to forgive, as given in the parable that follows, is because we have been forgiven. Furthermore, the implication is that we have been forgiven to an immensely greater degree our sins against the triune God, so we must not harbor grudges against our neighbors. We must forgive, as we have been forgiven. We pray that every Sunday when we repeat the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our debts (or trespasses) as we forgive our debtors (or those who trespass against us)." Are those just words? Or do we mean to live by what we pray?

Second, note that forgiving is not the same as forgetting, and the commandment to forgive does not mandate that we submit to continuing abuse or mistreatment. Yes, we are commanded to turn the other cheek, but that commandment also has limits. Not enough time today to wrestle with this difficulty. Just remember that forgiveness does not mean submission to cruelty.

Finally, remember the context of chapter 18 in Matthew: Jesus is concerned about the unity and cohesiveness of particular congregations that will follow him. He is concerned about communities holding together in love, humility, and self-sacrifice, not so much about individual relationships in the community. To allow an unforgiving spirit to run rampant in particular churches is to run the risk of destroying those communities. And that must not happen. We must forgive lavishly, because we have been forgiven, even more lavishly.

Paul writes this in the Romans letter, chapter 14, verse 7. "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." So regardless of which side of the issue we are on in all of these things that are indifferent, we belong to God. And that's what really matters.