

Living Together when we Disagree Rev. Katherine Museus

16th Sunday After Pentecost | September 17, 2023 | Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University

Readings: Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:1-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

When we are preparing for the convocation ceremony – that thing where we pack all the first-years into the Chapel even though it's August and we don't have air conditioning, to welcome you to the Valpo community –

When we are preparing for the convocation ceremony, the university president's office usually contacts the pastors and lets us know the theme that President Padilla would like to lift up. Then, we choose a Bible reading that speaks to that theme. Through that process Pastor Jim came up the passage that was read at this year's Opening Convocation, Psalm 133:

*How very good and pleasant it is
When kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
Running down upon the beard,
On the beard of Aaron,
Running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
Life forevermore.*

It's a great song to raise at the beginning of a new school year, as we're welcoming new students and faculty and staff into the community. It's a mix of "how great it is just to be together" and some exhortation towards being intentional about getting along.

Today's Bible readings are about the opposite thing.

*How very horrible and terrible it is
When kindred live together in disagreement.*

And that's probably as much a part of our experience of living with others as is the happiness and unity thing. If you live with other humans, you're probably going to argue about something sometime (and it's probably going to be the dishes). If you are in a close relationship with another person, you're probably going to hurt each other from time to time. Siblings are notorious for fighting. Parents and children always hit points of friction.

The same goes for the Church. Most of us who have spent a long time in a congregation have at least one story of a painful fight – about anything from the way we clean the carpets to deep theological divides.

God has created us for relationship, not only with God but also with one another. We *need* each other; loneliness has big impacts both on our mental and our physical health. And we find so much joy in each other, in having friends that will spend hours hunting for gnomes with us or cry on our shoulder.

We were made for each other. But that doesn't mean it's easy to be together.

I think that's why God cares so much about things like forgiveness and mercy and compassion. Because those are the kinds of things that will help us navigate through the times when our relationships get hard.

One of my favorite things about the letters of Paul, collected in the New Testament, is that they give us examples of Paul guiding early church communities through real conflicts. We see him working out how to take God's call to forgiveness and love and unity and put it into practice in real life.

In today's passage from Romans, Paul is dealing with arguments about whether it's okay to eat meat and about observing the Sabbath. And even though our cultures are different, I think you can understand the basic situation. One group is saying: "If you're a real Christian, you won't eat meat. It's an important way to honor God!" and the other group is like, "Psh. *That's* not in the Sermon on the Mount."

And sometimes in these kinds of splits, group identities start to form: the meat-eaters vs. the fasters. And then that group identity becomes part of the individuals' identities...and suddenly within this local church community we've got two groups whose main reason for existence has become to disagree with each other.

And that's what Paul seems to want to break down with his pastoral advice. "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain [from eating meat], and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; **for God has welcomed them.**"

He even honors both positions on the issue: "...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."

Can you imagine being in one of those arguing groups – believing so strongly that this "to meat or not to meat" issue is an important part of living a faithful Christian life – and then someone decides to bring an outside authority – kind of like when our churches call in the bishop – and then this is the first century, so the letter takes a long time to travel to wherever Paul is, and then a long time to get Paul's letter back – and the whole time you've still been fighting, maybe even harder than before – and then you finally get that letter back and you open it to read it out loud for everybody, getting ready to laugh in the faces of all those unfaithful meat-eaters, and then you read Paul's word:

"You're both right. What's wrong is to be fighting with each other."

If that message could get past our self-defense mechanism – if we could really hear it and pray on it – it would demand that we change our whole perspective issue. The real issue for God is the community. Is the togetherness and love shared between the people of God. That is the whole purpose of the church. That's why God gave it to us.

And in the end, Paul puts the whole issue – and the whole community – under God. “Why do you pass judgment on your [sibling in Christ]? Or, why do you despise [them]? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

It's a reminder to be humble – because we all have the same position before God: forgiven sinners desperately throwing ourselves upon the grace of God.

This is the same way Jesus deals with the question of forgiveness in today's Gospel reading. How often do you have to forgive a sibling in Christ? Well, how much has God forgiven you?

Remembering that we are all under God shifts the whole perspective of these questions. It calls us to see ourselves with humility and to see others with the mercy of God.

This is not to advocate for an anything-goes policy within the Church. Last week we read Jesus's advice on when and how to approach another Christian when they've wronged us, even to the point of sending them away from the community (Matt. 18:15-20). Though even then, outside the community, they again become a person the Church is trying to reach out to, to call to repentance and new life and welcome back in. But still, Jesus shows us there are times when boundaries will need to be drawn.

Paul also advises that we need to stand strong when it comes to the Gospel. In fact, it's not that Paul is being wishy-washy regarding the meat eating – he's just standing on another issue – the call to faithful community – and sees that as more central to the Gospel.

In another instance, Paul uses that same logic to draw a firmer line. In 1 Corinthians, Paul calls out the community for how they celebrate Communion. Back then, it was more of a meal than the simple ritual we have today. But some of the wealthier members – those with more excess food and leisure time – got together earlier to celebrate earlier than others could. So by the time the poorer members could get to the meal, the wealthier members would already be there, and sometimes drunk on the wine, and much of the meal would be gone.

And Paul says no – that's betraying the community, that's going against the Gospel. Y'all need to quit that and celebrate Communion together (1 Cor. 11:17-34).

Sometimes, living together in community does mean drawing lines and taking stands.

Which just brings us back to where we started: living together is hard. But it is also beautiful and life-giving and worth fighting for. It's worth doing the work to discern the gospel response to our

issues. It's worth trying to see one another (and our opinions) through the lens of God's grace towards all of us. It's worth laying aside our pride for. It's worth telling someone that they hurt us. And it's worth drawing the necessary boundaries to preserve the community.

And every step we take – every word of forgiveness we offer – every apology we make – every line we draw – every issue we leave open to interpretation – we do it all, throwing ourselves and our decisions on the mercy of God.