

## Romans 14:1-12

### “The Purple Church”

I don't know how many of you have watched Ellen DeGeneres' show, “Game of Games.” It is entertaining and clever and not terribly mind boggling. Through a series of challenges, there are four contestants who end up in the Final Challenge. They are lined up on a platform, high in the air, and asked questions on by one. If a contestant misses, Ellen punches a button and he or she drops immediately into a hole that delivers them to wherever and they are out of the game. The questions start fairly easy and get harder as they progress.

In one episode, a player was asked, “What do you call someone who does not eat meat?” After some thought he said, “A Presbyterian.” I share this because, at first glance, the passage that we just heard seems to be a debate about whether one can eat meat and still be a Christian. But in a phrase, the passage is about unity in diversity.

The early church was made up of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians who, of course, came from very diverse backgrounds, traditions and regulations. In almost all of his letters, Paul has to address the issues of divisiveness that this causes. Many of the lifelong Jews who came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah felt that those Gentile followers of Christ needed to become Jewish first. This meant accepting Jewish dietary laws, being circumcised and other traditions that were not important to the mission and ministry of Christ.

But because the church is made up of human beings, some of the members of the church just could not accept Paul's ruling that this was not necessary. Paul almost sounds like a broken record as he tells one congregation after another that unity is more important. In his letter to the church at Rome, he uses the debate of what kind of food is considered clean as a springboard.

In 2020, where the world is increasingly more divided than we are unified, I can only imagine the different issues that Paul would have had to comment about to help us get the point. Not only meat versus veggies or strong versus weak, to use his terms, but Republican versus Democrat; male versus female; rich versus poor; white versus person of color; Conservative versus Liberal; wear a mask versus no mask; the list goes on and on.

Now, like any good preacher, when push comes to shove, Paul does not take sides with either group in the congregation. He maintains a strong middle. Before I became a parish minister, I thought this was just chicken. But Paul's words help me understand that it is actually Biblical. Paul says that the church is made up of people who are equal but unique. So rather than being a red church or a blue church, Paul is calling us to be a purple church. To be a beautiful blend of the gifts and personalities that God has given each of us in order for the church to grow and flourish and share the Good News.

To help us fully understand his message, Paul reminds us that we are **CREATED** as equal. The writer of Genesis says: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) Our savior Jesus Christ reiterates the claim when he said, "Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are the messengers greater than the one who sent them." (John 13:16) And Paul tells the church at Galatia, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus," (Galatians 3:28)

Many of us know these verses but they may just be words on a page. After all, let's be honest. Human nature more often than not causes us to think in terms of "we" versus "they" or "my way" versus "the wrong way." Yet, this is specifically what Paul is preaching against.

Paul does this be reminding us that, since we are ALL created in the image of God, our common goal is simply to be faithful. If we eat meat, give thanks to God for it. If we eat vegetables, give thanks to God for them. Being created equally calls us to worship and glorify God equally, even though we may do this in different ways because of our backgrounds. And when we fail to see each person as a child of God, it is easier to see him or her as the personification of the thing that we oppose.

Now, we might naturally assume that the one who is different might be the weaker one but Paul makes it clear in his words that those who are willing to bring their new traditions, thoughts and ideas to the fold are actually stronger. We know this because he calls the ones who eat only vegetables the weak ones, implying the Jews.

These are the people that are stuck in their ways. The formerly strict Jews who have not paid attention to the many times that Jesus said, “You have heard it said BUT I tell you.” Jesus did not mean that the old way, let’s say “an eye for an eye” was wrong when it was written. Only that “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” is new and better. Because we are all made in the image of God.

Now, not only does Paul remind us that we are all CREATED equally but that we all *SIN* equally as well. Every person sitting in this sanctuary is a sinner. I have a colleague who told me that one of his parishioners, an older lady who was full of piety and self-righteousness, invited him to lunch. He knew that the root cause of this invitation was because a church member who had divorced his wife, a fellow church member, and then married another woman in the church had been asked to serve on the Session.

But it was the way she phrased her demand that helped him understand that she had either never read Paul’s letters or just did not want to understand him. After she served her homemade

chicken salad on her fine china to the preacher she said, “Now Bob. You listen to me. We cannot have ANY sinners on the Session or in the pulpit.” When he answered, “Well then, Mrs. Smith, there will be no one on the Session or in the pulpit” she said, “Please, you know what I mean.” I promise you – I am not making this up!

The Scriptures are full of instructions on not judging others but there was a pivotal moment in my seminary days that helped me understand this better than anything I had ever read in the Bible. Right in the middle of a class on Christian Education, our professor just stopped and wrote the word GRACE on the board. We were not even talking about grace. It was as if the Holy Spirit just went into overdrive.

Then she said emphatically, “Grace is God looking at you and me and seeing Jesus Christ.” Anytime I start to judge someone, especially in my mind, I remember this. Because honestly, if God can look at me with all my flaws and mistakes and see Jesus Christ, how dare I look at someone else without doing the same.

This is the truth that Paul builds on when he says in verse 8, “If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s!” Paul means that our relationship to every other person can be seen through our relationship with the one true God. This helps us get beyond actions, opinions and ideas that are different from our own without judging the other person.

What Paul is saying is that religious, political and even doctrinal divides are not wrong per se. But it is not the will of God for humanity to use any of these differences to separate each other into categories of worthiness or correctness. We are all created equally, as children of God. We all are sinners in the eyes of God. There is no measurement for sin. A little white lie

and murder are both things that separate us from the will of God and therefore sins in God's eyes.

But thanks be to God that we are also equally *REDEEMED*. We are all on level playing ground when we stand at the foot of the cross. One of my favorite storytellers, minister Michael Lindvall, tells about the night he was walking home from the church to the manse after dark, the full moon lighting his way. He passed the home of a certain church member, Alvina Johnson, who was dumping a basket of fallen leaves that were gathered from her yard, across the fence, *in the dark*, into the yard of the neighbor. He thought this was odd behavior, even for Alvina. He cleared his throat and simply said, "You're working late tonight, Alvina" and continued walking.

Not surprisingly, Alvina showed up in his office first thing the next morning. I won't take the time to tell the whole story but it seems that Alvina was dumping the leaves into her neighbor's yard because she said they came from HIS tree and it was only fair that HE should rake them up.

Lindvall dared to ask the obvious question. How do you know they were his leaves? Well, it seemed that, after several autumns had passed with an ongoing leaf war about who should have to rake, Alvina had paid a young teenager to climb the neighbor's tree and put X's on each leaf with a permanent marker. That way, she was only returning the leaves that really belonged to him. (1)

The story is funny because Alvina really believes she is right. But it is also sad because she really believes life is fair. And you and I know that if life were fair, not one of us could look forward to ending up in Heaven. Not one of us here, even the preacher, especially the preacher, can get to Heaven without being washed by the blood of Jesus. Each one of us here is just a

sinner in need of redemption when we stand beneath the shadow of the cross as Jesus pays for our sins.

Yet, Paul's words are meant to do more than teach us how to be strong Christians or to warn us about the pitfalls of being judgmental. Paul is trying to help the church in Rome and the church in Moore understand that the body of Christ on earth works best when we embrace each other's differentness, rather than try to keep those who are different out of the church.

And in our world of constant division and arguments and pointing the finger and who is right and who is wrong, Paul wants us to imagine what the world could be like if we treat each person we meet with *inherent and equal* dignity and respect. Richard Rohr calls it seeing the divine DNA in ourselves and everyone, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, nationality, appearance, class, sexual preference or politics. And oh friends, what a church, what a world this will be if we can use the strengths of our faith to help the weak and achieve this together!

As God's church today, we are called to live in community. Gospel living will always be a constant challenge because it almost always invites us to step out of the status quo and away from our comfort zones. But when we do this with truly open minds and hearts that are listening to the other person's perspective, we come closer to learning what God is calling the church to do and be.

The body of Christ is not called to be a red church or a blue church but a purple church. In a purple church, there are no denominational walls. In a purple church, the white-haired man in the suit shares a hymnal with the gum chewing, tattooed teenager as they sing "Amazing Grace" together. In a purple church there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. When we embrace the uniqueness of each member of the body and the gifts that both their

strengths and ours, and their weaknesses and ours, can contribute, we will embrace our purpleness.

Minister and author Jamie Buckingham wrote an article called “No right to quit.” I have found it to contain some guiding principles in my efforts at faithful living. In part he says, “Fellowship must not be based on externals – whether a man has a beer with his pizza or crosses himself when he prays – but on the fact that we have the same Father.” And to this, all God’s people said, “Amen.”

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(1) Michael Lindvall, The Good News from North Haven, Pocket Books, Schuster & Schuster, NY, NY, 1991, pgs. 140-147