

When Christians Disagree

Romans 14:1-4

This morning we are going to dive into a chapter that deals with what Christians are supposed to do when they disagree with each other about serious or important issues. There's a dynamic that I've seen play out many times in my years as a pastor – people start coming to church, usually on a Sunday morning, they have a good first impression – they like the music, they like the preaching, people are friendly, and they have a great experience. They feel very positive and look forward to coming back. For weeks they have somewhat of a honeymoon experience where everything seems good. They've finally found a church that fits and they want to plug in and become members.

But somewhere along the line they have a reality check – they hear something or find out something about someone or about the church that goes against what they've always believed or done and it's really troubling for them. They have a major disagreement and the honeymoon is over. Even though they've had mostly positive experiences and found encouragement and support to grow in their faith with a group of mostly like-minded believers, those areas of disagreement don't go away and keep gnawing at them. It leads to tension, conflict and frustration and eventually they begin to separate and start looking for a different church.

I don't know how many times I've seen that happen here at East Lincoln and I'm sure it's happened many more times without me even knowing it. And I know it happens at other churches too. There's kind of a revolving door. We have something like 15-20 churches in the Amery area and it's not because we've done such a great job at reaching people for Christ and planting churches to disciple everyone. It's because people disagree about things and rather than working through our differences to focus on the most important things we do agree on, we divide and separate and start new churches with people that agree a little more closely with each other. And now that we have so many options to choose from, when we disagree with something at one church that's important to us, we try another one to see if that's a better fit. Eventually, after trying a few churches and finding out that there's major disagreements within every church family, a lot of people just give up and stay home.

It's really discouraging when you're a pastor – especially when you go through a pandemic and people's differences rise to the surface and then show up on Facebook for everyone to see and argue about. Or when racial tensions erupt an hour away and the same thing happens. Or when the Governor gives an order and the same thing happens. Or when it's an election season and the same thing happens again... I'm not going to lie to you, it's been a tough year to be a pastor because with everything going on I've seen how quickly and easily we can be divided and hit a standstill.

What's God's will for what we should do and how we should treat one another when we disagree? How can we represent Jesus well? We've been looking for practical instructions to live by in Romans 12-15 and today we get to Romans 14, which is all about God's will when Christians disagree. This is an extremely important and relevant chapter in our situation, so we're going to spend a few weeks studying it. I truly believe it holds the keys for how we can make it through this difficult time, and if the Holy Spirit would convince each of us to apply these things to our lives, we will grow stronger because of it.

The church in Rome had to work through some major disagreements between its members. One of their greatest challenges was that they had people from both a Jewish and Gentile background coming together in the same church family, and because of that it presented them with all kinds of disagreements. They had been raised in very different ways and come to Jesus with very different perspectives and it was creating a lot of tension and relational conflict. Paul was well aware of it, so he wrote Romans 14 to try to help them work through it in a way that would honor Christ.

Read Romans 14:1-4.

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One of the major disagreements between some of the Jews and the rest of the people in the church in Rome, who were mostly Gentiles, had to do with dietary restrictions. We're not talking about gluten and dairy, but we are talking about meat and vegetables and other things. The Jewish Christians came from a background where there were all kinds of different rules that were part of their covenant relationship with God, including rules about eating meat. There were certain kinds of meat you could and couldn't eat and the animal had to be killed and prepared and eaten a certain way. Some people who were very strict had given up eating meat altogether because they saw it as a way they could be more faithful to God.

Other Jews weren't that strict, and Gentiles didn't have those rules at all. So most of the people in the church in Rome were meat-eaters and they didn't think anything of it when it came to their relationship with God. They were free to eat meat and enjoy it. And they really were free – the Gospel set them free, Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus set them free. In Colossians 2:16-17 Paul says, *"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."* They didn't have to follow Jewish rules to be more acceptable to God because Jesus had come and fulfilled all the rules – he was what all the rules of that covenant were pointing to. And when he came those rules weren't needed anymore. Faith in Jesus was enough... more than enough. Jesus made those rules obsolete through his life, death and resurrection.

But not all the Jewish Christians had come to fully understand and experience that. Some thought they were still required. So you can imagine what would happen when a vegetarian Jew became a Christian and became part of a church family with a bunch of meat-eaters. Their decision to not eat meat wasn't just about a personal diet preference, it was about their relationship with God. They didn't eat meat because they thought eating meat was wrong. They thought they were being faithful to God by not eating meat. So when the first church potluck came around, it was an eye-opening experience for them. The honeymoon was over.

Try to put yourself in that situation. It's not that hard. For us it probably isn't going to be about eating meat, but we have all kinds of other scenarios to choose from:

- Let's say you show up for church one Sunday having grown up as a Lutheran or Catholic your whole life and you find out that we don't baptize babies. What?!! How can you not baptize babies? Don't you want them to be part of your church? Don't you want them to go to heaven?
- Halloween is coming up and you hear some of your friends at church making plans to go trick or treating. One of their kids is even going to dress up like a ghost. Don't they know that trick or treating is wrong? Don't they know that Halloween belongs to Satan?!
- Let's say you've been having a lot of lower back pain and you're talking with people at small group about it and one of them recommends you try yoga... You don't know what to say, don't they know that yoga is part of a demonic false religion?
- Or let's say you invite some friends from church over to your house for supper and when they get there you offer them a drink – water, soda, beer... From that point on things feel strangely uncomfortable and you find out later that they think drinking alcohol is a sin...

There are all kinds of examples I could bring up here: Smoking, vaping, chewing... getting a tattoo or body piercing... divorce and remarriage... reading a Harry Potter book... playing Pokémon or Dungeons and Dragons... wearing or not wearing a mask... voting for Biden or a Democrat, voting for Trump... These are all things that Christians disagree about and there are many, many more. Some think there's no problem with them and others think they're a sin. And you can put yourself on either side of the scenario – sometimes you're the one who thinks something is just fine, other times you think something's wrong and a sin...

What do you do when you show up at a church potluck and you are appalled by the fact that there are people in your church who are eating meat? Or, what do you do when you find out that someone at church thinks you're a sinner because you ate a meatball at the church potluck?

Or, to hit closer to home: What do you do when you show up at church and someone isn't wearing a mask? Or, what do you do when you find out that someone at church thinks you're a sinner for not wearing a mask? What do you do when you find out someone thinks you're a sinner for wearing a mask? What do you do when you find out someone at church is voting for Biden? Or Trump? What do you do when someone at church thinks you're a sinner for voting for

Biden? Or for Trump? What do you do when you see someone at church at a demonstration for racial justice and awareness? What if they're holding a sign that says "Black Lives Matter?" What if you know someone at church thinks you're a sinner for doing those things?

I hope you see we're not talking about issues where it's easy to 'agree to disagree.' We're not talking about cheering for the Packers or Vikings (I hope!), we're talking about serious and important issues that Christians feel strongly about – sometimes very strongly – strong enough to break up friendships and divide churches. These are matters of deep emotion and conviction. These are issues that people get very angry about. These are issues that people get deeply hurt by and lose sleep over and cry about.

That's what happens when Jews and Gentiles become Christians and join the same church. And that's what happens when any group of Christians comes together to try to do church together. The honeymoon is over.

Now, is it possible for us be part of the same church family and joyfully carry out the mission Christ has given us with unity and love for each other in spite of such serious areas of disagreement? If we try to do it in our own wisdom and strength, then the answer is no. We will fight and divide and keep doing what the American church is so good at. But if Jesus is in us and we live to honor and glorify him first and foremost in our lives, then yes, I believe it is. And I believe that's exactly what Jesus wants and why he designed the church the way he did. "They will know we are Christians by our love for each other." People with deep differences coming together in love and unity to worship Christ and carry out his mission – that would be remarkable.

But brothers and sisters, we have a long way to go...

The original plan was to keep preaching through the first 12 verses of this chapter, but I've decided to stop here today. I want to leave room for the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts as we approach the Communion table without rushing through these instructions. We are going to sing a song and then take Communion together and I'd like to ask you to take this time to allow God to search your heart. Communion is a time when we celebrate our fellowship and

unity with Jesus and with one another. And it may be that the Lord will reveal something to you that you need to confess to him and make some changes.

I'd also like to ask you to take some time in the next two of weeks to read and re-read Romans 14 – read it every day if possible. And ask the Lord to reveal to you any area in your life where he wants you to make some changes. Next Sunday we have a guest speaker as part of our Fall Conference and on the following Sunday we'll pick up where we left off.