

Is It Worth It?

Romans 14:1-3

I want to start this morning with a story – parts of which are true, parts of which are made up. It was about a year ago when the legend of Frank the Tank began. Three of my brothers come up to this area to enjoy some bow hunting together on public land and when they got here last fall they checked their trail cameras and saw pictures of this huge buck that they affectionately named Frank the Tank. (show pictures) Frank showed up a couple of times on camera and was so impressive that they decided to devote several days to hunting him.

The first few days they really didn't see much of anything so they kind of gave up and moved on to other places. But toward the end of the trip, they decided to give it one more chance. So they got up early, went out to the woods and got set. It turned out to be a wild morning. At one point one of my brothers had quite a few deer around when all of a sudden this gigantic buck appears that took his breath away. He had never seen a deer that big, and it was headed straight for him. He drew back and it stopped 8 yards away, but there was some brush in play, so he hesitated. And then Frank the Tank looked right at him. My brother was so rattled he couldn't take the shot.

So Frank marched on toward my other brother who unfortunately had just gotten down from his tree, but he heard the deer approaching and looked up and saw him. There he was, Frank the Tank, and he was coming within bow range. So he quickly grabbed his bow as Frank walked by, somewhere around 40 yards. He shot and missed low. But then Frank turned around and came by a second time and my brother shot and hit him, but low. And then he walked by a third time but this time he shot over his back. And then Frank took off.

For the rest of that day and the next they searched for him. There wasn't a lot of blood and it became apparent that he wasn't hit hard, but they were hopeful they would find him. After looking for two days and walking for several miles they finally had to give up. Maybe he wasn't hit hard enough and would survive.

Fast forward now to late this summer. My brothers came up to do some scouting and put up trail cameras and they put a number of them in the area where they encountered Frank the Tank, hoping to get him on camera. They have cameras that send the pictures to your cell phone and for the first few weeks I didn't hear

anything. But then, all of a sudden, a barrage of text messages started lighting up my phone. One of their cameras captured a picture of a gigantic buck and it looked just like Frank the tank. (picture) They were as giddy as a bear in a candy shop. 40 year old men acting like kids. Goosebumps all over. They started talking about how soon they could get together to go after him - so excited about the upcoming adventure.

But then one of them mentioned something about his new crossbow, and my other brother was appalled. He had recently decided to go more traditional and use a recurve because he felt that was the only way to be a good sportsman. My other brother strongly disagreed, arguing that a crossbow was far more accurate and ethical and people who go traditional only end up wounding deer and loosing them. The third brother was caught in the middle with his compound bow, which used to be what they all used, but now he was seen as “unsportsmanlike” by one and “unethical” by the other. They argued back and forth, trying to convince each other that they were right and the others were wrong. Things got more and more heated and they got mad at each other. There were insults and accusations and they got so mad they ended up cancelling the trip. No more adventure together. No more comradery, no more stories and memories to share. The excitement was gone.

Now let me ask you, was it worth it? Were their differences about which bow to use worth treating each other like they did? Was it worth ruining the adventure and souring their friendships?

Something very similar is happening in churches all across America – even in ours. Most pastors I talk to are shaking their heads in disbelief as they watch what the people in their churches are doing to each other and the division it’s causing. People have strong opinions about all the things going on in our nation – COVID, masks, government orders, racial protests, Trump, elections... and faithful Christians within churches strongly disagree with each other about all of them. Those disagreements are leading people to do things that are very divisive and it’s having a crippling effect on the church.

When I think about the church the picture that comes to mind is a rowboat drifting out at sea. There are such disagreements that the people have quit rowing. There’s arguing, frustration, hurt, and anger and the boat isn’t going anywhere. And the thing I want us to think very seriously about today is: “Is it

worth it?" Are our differences and opinions about all these things worth being divided over? Are they worth the effect they are having on our relationships, mission, and reputation? Or are our relationships, mission, and reputation worth making some personal changes so we can get the boat moving forward again?

We are learning from the apostle Paul in this sermon series, and in Romans 14 he talks all about when Christians disagree. How are we supposed to live according to God's will when we have disagreements with each other? How can we represent Jesus well? As I've spent time in this chapter I've seen three sets of instructions emerge that can really help us and we're going to look at the first set today.

Read Romans 14:1-3.

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.

The situation in the church of Rome is spelled out here. There was a major disagreement between the Gentile believers and some of the Jewish believers, and it had to do with whether or not a Christian had to obey certain Jewish laws. Some Jewish Christians thought that you had to abstain from eating meat and had to observe certain Jewish holidays in order to be a true Christian. But the rest of the people in the church disagreed. They understood that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish covenant with God and therefore, through faith in Christ, Jews and Gentiles alike were released from the obligation to obey those rules. Paul makes it clear in this chapter that they were correct, but some of the Jewish Christians just weren't there yet. They didn't fully understand their freedom in Christ, thus, according to Paul, they were "weak in faith."

But Paul wasn't all that concerned about who was right and who was wrong. He was concerned about how they were treating each other in the face of their disagreements. There was division in the fellowship. People were avoiding one another. When they were together there was quarreling. Those who ate meat were despising those who abstained, and those who abstained were passing judgment on those who ate. Each side was digging in their heels. There was division and that's what Paul was concerned about. Their differences were

important, but they weren't worth treating each other the way they did. Christian unity and the fellowship of believers was more important than their opinions. It didn't matter who was right and who was wrong if it was driving a wedge between them. The unity of the church, their love for one another, their mission, their fellowship, their worship, their reputation in the community... these were far more important. Their differences of opinion weren't worth the division it was causing.

So the first thing Paul does in this chapter is to call them to stop their divisive behaviors. "You need to welcome those who disagree with you, but not to quarrel over opinions. And you need to despising and passing judgment on one another."

When I think about our situation and our disagreements about COVID, masks, government orders, responses to racial protests, Trump, elections, and so on, I think Paul would say that they are not worth fighting and dividing over in the church family. These are important issues, but not worth sacrificing our Christian unity. They are worth talking about and trying to find common ground that works for everybody, but they're not more important than loving one another. They aren't worth more than fellowship and worship with one another, or carrying out our mission together. But they're not worth fighting about and dividing over. Therefore I think Paul would tell us the same thing as in Romans 14:1-3: stop all divisive behaviors.

I see us doing some of the same things that were happening in the church in Rome. Rather than welcoming one another I can see a coldness toward those who disagree. I can see people avoiding people that they wouldn't have avoided before. There's frustration and offense because of our disagreements and we just don't want to deal with "those people" anymore. We've put up walls between us, but we need to start tearing them down. When Paul gets to the end of this section, he writes this in Romans 15:5-7: "*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*"

What if Jesus refused to welcome us when we did something that might be frustrating or offensive to him? I'm really glad he doesn't do that with me, and he's asking me to do the same with my brothers and sisters in the church family.

He wants us to live in harmony so that with one voice we glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. If Christ has welcomed us, can we not also welcome one another?

Maybe you've been avoiding someone that you used to be friends with in the church family because of something they've said or done that you strongly disagree with. I think Christ would urge you to reach out to them and begin to reconnect. You don't have to talk about your differences or try to agree. You can leave that area alone. But take steps to reconnect and welcome them in.

I also see quarrelling between people in the church family. I wonder what Paul would say about Facebook? Facebook is a platform that makes it way too easy for people to quarrel about opinions. We need to be really careful about what we do on Facebook. All it takes is one post or one comment to start a quarrel. It's so tempting to post or say something to promote or defend our opinion about any of these issues that are dividing our nation, but you have to realize that every time you do that, you stir up division with people from East Lincoln who strongly disagree with you. Some of you like using Facebook to publicize what you believe or agree with in these controversial issues and I want to ask you to be careful and strongly consider stopping. It's proven to be very divisive and I want you to think about whether your opinion is worth it? In most cases I would say it's not.

A couple weeks ago one of my college friends posted something that I thought was really good and made a lot of sense. It had to do with following Christ's example when it came to his involvement in politics. It was something I agreed with and thought other Christians would see as helpful and insightful. But oh my goodness... Other college friends who were also Christians – some of them were pastors and missionaries – jumped all over him. They starting making all kinds of assumptions and accusations – all over a little post! We've got to be careful.

Quarrelling can obviously happen outside of Facebook as well and can be started in similar ways. One of the things I've seen that inadvertently causes a lot of division is that people just assume everyone in the church family will agree with their perspective on these issues, so they say things to express their point of view and I don't think they realize how much people disagree with them. We've got to be more careful. And when we start to feel defensive and argumentative, we've got to overcome that urge to quarrel. Because of the volatility of the current issues that are dividing our nation, any expression of opinion will result in

divisiveness and quarrelling. Is it worth it? Listen to what Paul says in Titus 3:9: *“But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.”*

Then there’s despising and judging one another – I have heard multiple times: “I will never see that person the same way again.” And that’s one thing if you’ve actually sat down and talked with someone and got to know them and where they’re coming from, but a lot of our judgment calls against people only have to do with what side of an issue we see they’ve landed on. We quickly label people and make assumptions about them without actually knowing where they’re coming from. I sit down with a lot of people to find out where they’re coming from, and I find out almost always that their perspective is more reasonable than I first thought – even though I might still disagree with them. So we need to stop despising and judging one another.

Any kind of behavior that’s leading to division needs to stop. It’s not worth it to keep going that direction.

The end of the story about Frank the Tank was made up – my brothers aren’t divided over which bow to use. They all use the same kind. And they are really excited about the upcoming adventure together – I’m excited to join them.

I’m also excited about East Lincoln Alliance Church and what God can do in and through us. Wonderful days are ahead. But in order to get there we are going to have to examine our hearts and begin to make some changes. Are you doing anything that’s leading to division between you and others in the church? Are you avoiding anyone? Are you posting your opinions about divisive issues on Facebook? Do you have an attitude of despising or judging those who disagree with you? If you see these or any other divisive behaviors in your life, I urge you to confess them to the Lord and ask for his power to change.