

Pentecost XVI – 2023

Epistle:

Romans 14:1-12

¹ Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. ² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

"Welcome those who are weak in the faith." In the name...

Among the greatest mysteries of the Gospel for me is the sheer pervasiveness of redemption. Having grown up thinking that salvation was exclusively directed at cleaning up my act (especially my mouthy tendencies), I'm still SHOCKED when I read passages like today's reading from Romans. Jesus didn't die merely to get Nathan to shut up once in a while and stop mouthing off to his teachers, God bless each one of them. Though he did die for that, and the sacrifice for that alone makes him worthy of my worship.

According to today's passage, the death and resurrection of Jesus informs how I befriend and cherish exceedingly weak Christians. It informs how I eat meat. It informs how I eat vegetables. There is a way to eat vegetables to the greater glory of God, and to the praise of Jesus Christ in all things. Unreal. According to today's passage, there is a way to abstain from foods to the greater glory of God. There's a way to glorify God by honoring a feast day! There's a way to glory God by passing a boring day. We live to the Lord. We die to the Lord.



That thought alone is worthy of a sermon. I'd just as soon experience the unrivaled joy of the Lord the next time I trim the hedges in my front yard, rather than just do it out of sweaty annoyance. Paul says that's possible.

But Paul seems to highlight something even more important to the Christian believer—the care given to our brothers and sisters along the way. Let me ask the question this way: “How would I treat a weak Christian if EVERYTHING hinges on a crucifixion one spring afternoon in first-century Palestine?” or “How would I treat an exasperating child, an impossible coworker, or an abrasively weak Christian if ultimate reality reveals itself as Gift, as incarnate and self-sacrificing Love?” How would I pray for incompetent leaders of any kind, if the laughter of God is truly at the center of my pain?

An impatient answer from your priest might be this: there is not time enough in this world to spend languishing and wallowing in the cesspool of your offenses. I kind of hate that response, true as it may be, because it smells like some kind of “get over it.” ~~And “getting over it” does not square with my sermon last week.~~ Love is so much bigger than ‘getting over it.’ We ARE given all of the time in this world and the next to be the Church—to be the agent of reconciliation in this world—the offense-bearers who get a kick out of turning the other cheek in search of greater joy. This is where the irony of Christianity becomes so thick, is it not? Deepest joy comes out of deepest sorrow if Jesus, in fact, perfected love for you through torture.

You'll forgive how ~~melodramatic~~ ^{3 years} that sounds, but here's the reality, friends. Here's the reality. In the past ~~six months~~ ^{3 years} alone, you have seen a city, a country, and hundreds of thousands of people infected with a brand-new disease. You have seen escalating tensions in Russia, the tensions of a messy Presidential race, 1000's of children sent home for their studies, the financial bailout of a million businesses post-COVID, and then you come to church. You come to church. Is the redemption of Christ pervasive enough for this? Why are we here? How do I eat my vegetables to the glory of God today, Father Nate? How do I worship the Lord who reigns over disease today, Father Nate? Where is your God?

And in a strange parallel to last week's Gospel, Paul adds threefold insight to this theological problem:

1. Everything matters, including your vegetables. Especially people. From storm-clouds to nuclear warheads, everything matters. Jesus Christ is supreme over all.
2. Your most sincere moment as a Christian will be evidenced by how you respond to the weakest people around you. *Because* every knee will bow and give praise to Jesus, you are now free to love what makes them strong, protect what makes them weak, and focus on your own sin. And in doing so, you have the mind of Christ.
3. You really cannot expect much of people. In the end, you must be patient with them. Apart from the Sacrament itself, no greater vessel of God's glory can be seen than the person sitting next to you right now. You are in the presence of God-imagined immortality. It's not an angel. Nor is it a devil. It's increasingly gray-headed Nate.

Sorry. It's your block-headed husband. It's your insufferable sibling. It's your child who won't sit still. It's your dad who's never listened. It's your boss who's totally incompetent. Whoever it is, it's them! Paul says it best, "Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'
¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Each week when I invite you to this altar, it is as sincere an offer as I can make. As Jesus can make, really. I am very weak and very tired, and yet I find unassailable strength at this altar. It is here that I find strength to forgive my brother or sister from my heart (says Jesus). ~~True pity is not insulting condescension. It's full identification. It's a realization that you're worse than the other guy!~~ I honestly lack the power to forgive, and so I look to Jesus. I assume that you, too, lack the power, and so I tell you to look to Jesus. Jesus is both Word and Sacrament. We ~~hear him~~ ^{hear him} here in the Gospel preached. We taste him in his body given. It's that power that marches against injustice!!! And then lovingly prays for the very one who oppresses. It's that power that rebuilds a city, because everything matters now. Especially love. It is here that we understand most fully the sheer pervasiveness of the Gospel.

Gospel reading

In the name...