

Title: Do not despise Anyone, for God has Welcomed Them  
Jennifer Hasler  
Romans 14: 1-13  
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**Romans 14:1-13:** Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. <sup>2</sup> One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand; for God has welcomed them. <sup>5</sup> One person judges one day more sacred than another; another judges every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. <sup>6</sup> Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. <sup>8</sup> If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

<sup>10</sup> Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup> It is written:

“As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,  
‘every knee will bow before me;  
every tongue will acknowledge God.’”

<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister

Friday was the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Most of us alive on that day remember clearly where we were that day and aspects of our lives around that day. The events that day would change us in various ways as we returned to a new normal, much like I expect 19 years from now we will see some changes in our lives coming out of our current pandemic. Some of us remember being able to greet people at the airline gate. There will be change, as that is one certainty we will all experience. And even in this change, there is hope.

I imagine among those listening we have many different perspectives on this day.

- Some see it as a day of patriotism where Americans pulled together and responded against a viscous attack.
- Some see it as a day concerned about the myopic perspectives of our nation.
- Some see the failing of a government over the previous decade to take seriously the change in the world.

- Some see a major concern of government surveillance into the individual lives of people that became assisted by large corporations.
- Some will see the unbelievable tragedy of that day
- Some will see the bravery of the passengers taking down Flight 91, likely saving many others

I imagine we have many other perspectives by those listening.

We live in a country where we hear a wide range of perspectives. I'm sure everyone is quite aware of the range of perspectives through this pandemic and political season.

Strong differences of opinion are as old as human history. What is different is that only recently have so many been empowered to have such a voice. We live in a unique place in history where potentially everyone's voice could be heard. The differences *seem* so much louder now.

We live in a place where the founders looked towards the ideal that everyone is of sacred worth to God and everyone has the image of God. We have been a people struggling to live towards that ideal ever since, and making progress bit by bit throughout our history.

These concepts come from the inspiration of a small first century community led by a Jewish Rabbi who listened to everyone and connected to everyone from all walks of life. This man Jesus would after his resurrection command each of us "to make disciples of all nations". (Matt 28:18)

All are valuable.

Everyone is equally valuable.

Everyone is welcome in this community. The Kingdom of God.

This early community soon found out with many voices came disagreements. The early Church as we see in the book of Acts as well as in the later letters had many disagreements. From the writings of the early church fathers, we see the disagreements only increase.

On the other hand, when the community was in unity of purpose, not necessarily unity in everything they thought, God worked in powerful ways. Pentecost was partially a miracle of the disciples coming together while huddled in the upper room. We see this pattern again in Acts chapter 4, in Acts 7 after they came together after handling the feeding of the widows, as they

dispersed out of Jerusalem, and on and on and on. It seems to be the continuous history of the church.

Today's passage from Romans is one of those letters from Paul on unity, coming at the end of a long systematic letter on the grace and redemption and life in the kingdom. Paul previously wrote an entire letter to the Corinthian church on unity, an entire 16-chapter letter. Paul wrote this letter just a few years after he founded and lived with this church for two years. This letter helps give more of the background and issues into this passage.

Two of the issues are whether or not to eat meat, and whether or not to observe some days as being more special than other days. Both issues are questions of how the Church interacts with communities, including those in the church who may have come from those communities.

Why an issue with eating meat? Was the concern similar to debates between vegetarians and non-vegetarians today?

The core issue was not whether or not to eat meat, as most would given the opportunity, but rather whether they should eat meat that was sacrificed to an Idol, some other God in the Greco-Roman pantheon. Many celebrations involved dinner where the meat was given as a sacrifice as part of that celebration. Part of the sacrificed meat was often given to those giving the sacrifice. If that was not a difficult enough situation, much of the sacrificed meat for a particular temple was sold at the market to raise funds for that particular temple. So when you went to a typical market, you likely could assume most of the meat came from temple sacrifices.

Christians know that Idols are not real, so there is nothing to worry about. Those Christians who came from a Jewish heritage would not touch anything they thought would have come from Idols as that would be their tradition. Some other Christians might be uncomfortable with meat sacrificed to Idols. What food one can and cannot eat gets rather personal. Those who eat meat

and those who did not eat meat had strong justifications from Scripture as well as from Jesus' resurrection breaking-in on the earth.

One might wonder if they were in the minority of Christians by that time.

Paul seems to be making a rhetorical play on the word *weak*, as he does in other places. For those Christians who believe Idols do not mean anything, it seems that those Christians not eating meat have weak faith. Paul seems to emphasize the point by bringing up those who only eat things "dug out of the ground". Are they really weak? No of course not. Remember the story at the beginning of the book of Daniel, where Daniel and his friends ate only vegetables, but others around the king of Babylon ate meat? They out performed all of them. For those who don't eat meat sacrificed to Idols might see themselves having the stronger position, and those who do eat meat just are weak in their faith not to stand up to the world. We often see the other position as a *weak* position.

In the new Christian community, they were not tied to particular special days. Jesus was coming back soon, so every day had significant importance. Those from Jewish background both remembered the cycles of Jewish festivals, as well as they had family who were not Christian who held these festivals. They wanted to keep those memories and those connections. Those from other Pagan traditions had family who celebrated other festivals. As the gods other than God of Jesus were not real, there was no harm in participating with family and friends, right?

Holiday memories and food are powerful and really close to most people. These issues were core to the disagreements of most Christian communities. Certainly there were many more issues and disagreements. Paul had made his point.

"Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.

Also 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 and give thanks to God"

In everything, give thanks to God, do everything in honor of God. If we in our differences we are all doing what we are doing to honor God, and we recognize others are doing what they are

doing to honor God, then our disagreements take a different tone. It is you honor God doing something I don't understand, rather than why don't you follow God and do what is right.

“Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.”

“each of us will be accountable to God”

Each one should be convinced in their own mind at they will be accountable to God, and God alone within the circumstances of that individual's life, not the measure hundreds of years later. It still means one should do the work to understand, to question, to wrestle with these questions as well as to be open to new understandings that God may give.

The human tendency to divide over important differences is not the way of this new community. Rather, the community remains together, debates together, and strengthens each other together. And in so doing, it becomes a light to the communities around it.

Further, if we are to make disciples of *all nations*, don't we need individuals who can connect to a variety of viewpoints?

Imagine such a light in our communities today.

And yet, Paul does not simply stop at that point.

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions”  
“Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?”

Don't just bring in others in order to judge their perspectives and understandings, those aspects they have reasoned over the years. The word or a root of the word judge repeats itself throughout the Greek text. Don't take advantage of the *weak* among you and don't pass judgement on the *weak*. Who do we consider *weak* because they have a lesser viewpoint than our *enlightened* perspective?

What voices do we shut out of our conversations? If we included them, what kind of light would we be in our communities?

Look at our welcome statement. We welcome all, and we explicitly bring up many specific categories. We state that we welcome all “political viewpoints”, and it is good and right we name a place for everyone across all political viewpoints, particularly in this election year. Remember, all means all. That includes the person you most dislike.

A recent study by the Cato institute found that 62% of Americans “say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe”. And the trend seems to be increasing across all demographics. Where ever you are on the political spectrum, it means we have many people who don’t quite connect with “Welcome home”. Nearly two-thirds of Americans are not allowed to be fully authentic in a space, or a congregation indirectly runs off individuals wanting to be part of the community. We become more and more isolated from each other, an issue that only gets worse with our recent six-month isolation.

Such is the way of the world encouraging division and small warring factions. And yet, is that where we should be in the Kingdom of Heaven that has broken upon the earth, or is this the Kingdom of the Earth influencing the beloved community? Can we still be the body of Christ together? After all, we are to make disciples of all nations.

I am reminded of the words of Rev. Wiley Stevens just before the difficult votes in 2010 on the Affordable care act. Everyone who follows Christ is committed and called to caring for everyone in our community. We should not demonize others as not caring, because we all have the image of God in us and are committed to what Christ called us to do. The issue is that we have different approaches to finding ways to care for everyone in our community.

Some of you know I have been involved with a college ministry at GT for several years. The community has a Tuesday evening dinner and service each week. For the first week of November in 2016, the worship team faced a challenge. How do we bring unity in the community, as well as make sure those who are there are not just following the recent election numbers on their electronic

devices? We decided to do an outside cookout and an outside service where everyone put all of their electronic devices inside. We would be the community together, remembering most importantly our beloved community included and welcomed all.

Several individuals wrote and spoke words of encouragement fully expecting they would be healing for others in the community. The next day those same individuals realized as the community came around and loved on them that they would have the gift of healing and consolation offered to them.

From the words for John Wesley about the upcoming English election in 1774,  
”I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them  
1. To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy  
2. To speak no evil of the person they voted against, and  
3. To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.”

Unity is possible. For those who remember the days after 9-11, most of the country came together in unity. Eventually the old ways crept back in, as such is the way of the world. And yet, it gives us a picture of what could be possible. It can happen again, hopefully without such a tragedy. And how God knows we need unity in our country and within the greater beloved community.

We stand in a Disciples tradition that strongly values unity within the beloved community. Diversity of thought is our strength.

One Christian does not need to want or do the ministry of another. In fact, let us give thanks to God for each unique ministry, as well as thanks to God for placing us in ministry where God explicitly made for us.

Together we are the beloved community. Together we raise each person up and empower each person for ministry. We invite each and everyone one of us to the table as the beloved community. Everyone is welcome and respected.

Thanks be to God. Amen.