

WELCOME THE WEAK

Romans 14:1-12

September 11, 2011

The church has always been a place of drama and at times the theatre of the absurd. In one church I served, a deacon called one morning and said, "I want to donate a new grand piano to the church." He invited me to go with him to pick out the new piano. The new piano cost \$15,000. What he didn't tell me was that he traded in the church's old grand piano – one donated by a prominent family in the church – without their knowledge or permission. In fact, he didn't ask anyone. Well, the grand piano was delivered. The music director threatened to resign. The pianist refused to play it because she hated a Baldwin piano because she said the action was too stiff. The worship committee voted not to accept the gift. The deacon told everyone that I picked out the piano. Any rational person would know that was absurd. But what happens in church is not always rational. Church is always **a place of drama** – sometimes comedy, sometimes tragedy. Sure the stage is religious, but the actors are, as always, so predictably, incredibly human. The Romans 14 text shows the church in a drama over meat, wine, and Sabbath.

The church in Rome was not a cathedral, but a collection of house churches. Maybe some worshiped in Latin. Some worshiped in Greek. Some were rather formal; others casual. Some were having backyard bar-b-ques with grilled steaks bought at a discount at market after the meat had been used as an offering to the gods in the temple. Others had their noses bent out of shape and said this was paganism and a compromise of the gospel. Some were having red wine with their steaks and some of the members said, "No wine." Some of the church members were still observing the Sabbath and others said, "This is not necessary." Vegetarians, tee-totalers, and Sabbatarians: The church knows drama.

Paul calls the no-meat, no-wine, but Sabbath observers the weak, but he doesn't take sides. He is not as enamored with dualism as we are with our blue/red, black/white, left/right, conservative/liberal. As soon as we think we are strong, we are weak; as soon as we claim to know, we are ignorant. **"Knowledge puffs up but love builds up."** This is true for conservative knowing and for liberal knowing. "Knowledge, as it turns out, is learning to love God because God loved us first." This is the knowledge that matters and it is the knowledge missing in the quarrels of the church at Rome. One side thinks too highly of its **faithfulness**, the other too highly of its **knowledge**.

No doubt, they found Scriptures to back up their convictions. Perhaps those opposed to drinking wine dug up that text from Judges that said a nazarite, someone totally dedicated to God, was not to drink any wine. There have always been those who scour the Scripture like gold panhandlers to find a verse that will back up what they believe. The book of Leviticus has never been that important in Christian history until the church fight over homosexuality started. Now, it serves as gospel for many Christians. If I wanted to start a movement from Leviticus I would choose 19:9-10 – “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall leave some for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.” When Congress gets through cutting the budget, I hope they will leave some for the poor and the alien.

There are a lot of beliefs in this church. What some of you believe is all over the theological map and some of it, quite frankly, isn't even on the map. Some of you are biblical literalists; others not at all. Some of you believe in a world created in 6 literal days; some of you are evolutionary theists. Some of you want Sunday School after church, others want it before church. Some of you like the gnostic gospels, others only the final four: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I have been asked before not to have a bottle of water in the pulpit. Once I was told not to touch the communion ware during the Lord's Supper. A church once conducted a business meeting and voted that I was to be addressed as Rev. Rodney. I was 20 years old and the young people were calling me Rod. Drama, baby, drama.

Local church drama is like riding an angry bull at a rodeo. My next door neighbor growing up was a professional bull rider. He told me that someone sticks a needle in the bull just before they open that gate and put the rider in open space with no support but a piece of rope, a pair of clowns, and a barrel. Listen, in church, stuff happens, and it more often resembles a comedy or a tragedy than the body of Jesus Christ.

In one church I served, there was a man who came to visit every Monday. He always wore a black suit with a thin black tie. He would stand over my desk, like Snoopy hanging out over his dog house as a vulture, and read a list of criticisms he had gathered throughout the week. I always wondered how a man like this could own an ice cream company. The ice cream truck with that melodious music makes kids come running, but every Monday morning when the ice cream man came to my office, I wanted to run away. The ice cream man as Dracula – absurd.

Paul knows these kinds of problems like the back of his hand. In Jerusalem there was a food fight over the food stamp program. In Philippi, two

women, of all things, disrupted the missionary society (Philippians 3). In Colosse, some of the church members have a practice like walking in the air and are putting on airs of superiority (Colossians 3). In Galatia, church members were clinging to their Jewish customs. In Corinth: "**Chloe's people have reported to me that there are divisions in the church.**" Sounds like a bunch of tattle tales. "**Some of you say, 'I belong to Paul' or 'I belong to Apollos' or 'I belong to Cephas'" (I Cor. 1).** The church members seem to think they belong to the preacher who baptized them.

This, of course, makes no sense to us because **we don't think we belong to any one.** One of our most cherished idols is our vaunted freedom. Here we have a clash between sacred American philosophies of individualism, and the gospel that swears we are the slaves of Jesus Christ. Here we also have a clash between the American commitment to the Scottish "Common Sense" schools and the scientific method of the 17th century philosopher **Francis Bacon**, on the one hand, and the claims of the gospel on the other hand. Too many Baptist preachers have been bringing home the Bacon, frying it in the church's pan, and making us all feel like we have the only truth. This is why some Christians sincerely believe that all they are doing is taking the hard facts of Scripture and discovering the patterns that are already there. "The Bible says" becomes a hammer to nail down truth.

For some church members, taste trumps theology. Taste in meat, wine, music, you name it. Call it the **upgrade fallacy.** Our likes and dislikes are upgraded to the status of essential theology. People get worked up over the oxymoronic "worship wars," and are serious about whether music is traditional or contemporary, but I couldn't scare up a small group to protest if there were people here denying that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity. Scruples, habits, traditions, opinions shouldn't get a first class upgrade in the church. Yet you just never know until you hit a nerve or commit a *faux pas* what really matters to folks.

In Jonesboro, LA, I made a deal with the local radio station owner. In return for doing the early sports show for him, he would give me a thirty minute program once a week. What could be better? A radio sports talk host and a radio evangelist? Some church members thought it was undignified for their pastor to be a radio jock. They were embarrassed. The deacons had a meeting and voted that I couldn't do the morning sports show.

No wonder it is hard to hear Paul say, "Welcome the weak!" (***proslambanesthai*** means "take into one's household," and "accept with

an open heart.”) Make room in your heart for the weak instead of using your mind to make them feel less intelligent.

The Arabs have a story about why camels look so supercilious (filled with contempt and arrogance). They claim there are ten thousand names for God, but that the camel knows the right one! We Christians tend to be as smug as camels when we insist that our beliefs are the only true ones, and we are the truly strong ones.

Still, as it was in the beginning, so it is now: Some folks can't resist imposing their understanding of faith on others. Christians have a bitter history of drawing lines in the sand. One day the Pope drew a line in the sand, “There is only one true Church – the church of Rome.” Luther stepped over it and millions followed. American Puritans drew a line in the sand, and said, “I know we came here to escape the oppression of the state church, but now that we are in charge, we know how to have a good state church and you must all belong to our church.” Roger Williams stepped over the line, and the Baptists gleefully followed him. Southern Christians, many of them slave owners, drew a line in the sand and said “States rights and slavery forever,” and Abraham Lincoln stepped over the line in the sand and signed the Emancipation Proclamation. By 1876 the South had drawn another line in the sand and said, “The Constitution as it was originally. Get rid of the Civil War amendments that gave blacks the right to vote.” And then due to the unholy alliance between whites in the North and South, reunion was achieved at the expense of the newly won rights of African Americans. Listen, the powers that would rule our lives are always in the business of maintaining the line in the sand at any price: oppression, repression, suppression, depression. The 15th amendment gave African Americans the right to vote on July 9, 1868, but there were legal ways around even the Constitution. Elaborate “literacy tests” were used to deny blacks the right to vote. One question was, “Who is the attorney general of the U. S.? At what time of day on January 20 every four years does the term of the U. S. president end? And when legal ways didn't work there was the violence of the KKK and the intimidation of the White Citizens Councils. It would be almost another 100 years before the 15th amendment was really the law of the land.

Finally, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., marched across the dark line of racism and an entire nation followed him. Someone draws a line in the sand and says, “We will not ordain women.” Then almost all the church bodies stepped over the line and women are ordained. Someone then draws a line in the sand and says, “We will not ordain gays.” And the battle over that line in the sand is still being waged.

Paul refuses to settle the issue by issuing a directive or saying, "You are right," and "You are wrong." Instead he insists that our connection as family trumps our "knowledge". Therefore we should not "insist on our own way. And this is critical: If we refuse to place concern for the body first we are pursuing a disastrous course: "So by your knowledge the weak one is destroyed, the brother/sister for whom Christ died" (I Cor. 8:11). For Paul the issues are Jesus as Lord and the essential nature of being the body of Christ. Many church members believe that being a member of the church is **an incidental aspect** of being saved, but here it is paramount.

Can't we see? We are slaves of Christ. We are not free to do as we please. Jesus is Lord. The uprightness of our fellow slaves is the Lord's business and not ours. What is at stake here is whether or not we are guilty of a sense of **superiority**. Paul calls us to **subservience** to our Lord and Master and to the community.

In that spirit, I have some suggestions. Here at First Baptist Church I suggest that we respect core convictions deeply held, allow conversations around issues to be wide open, and accept that conflicts need to be honestly engaged.

Truth is we are all weak, weary, and worn. With the Apostle Paul, in the name of the one God raised from the dead, let us cut one another some slack, lighten up a wee bit, and welcome the weak; that is, one another.