

The Consecrated Church
Romans 14
Sunday, November 10, 2024 (Consecration Sunday)

This is a strange scripture reading to have on Consecration Sunday. Normally, this is a day when we think about what it means to consecrate our gifts and our lives to God. And instead we're listening to Paul talk about eating vegetables? Originally, I was planning on preaching on the story of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, where God takes the prophet Ezekiel into a valley that is filled with dried up bones, so they've been dead for a long time. And God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live again?" God brings the bones back together, puts muscle and flesh on them, and then breathes the breath of life into their bodies, and they live again.

Maybe *that's* an even stranger reading than *this* one. But it's a metaphor for how the exiled people of Israel were as good as dead, but that God could give them new life. I was going to relate that to the Transformation Team's process and the idea of God breathing new life into the church, and how we give our time and resources and abilities to help make that work happen. So there you go. That's the sermon I *was* going to preach. You got it in about a minute.

But on Wednesday morning, the men's group met. We've been reading through the book of Romans together since March, and this week, we came to chapter 14. Romans 14 is not a chapter that most people are familiar with. It hardly ever gets preached on. The only time that I really use it is at funerals, and that's just one verse (verse 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." But the *rest* of the chapter is all about eating and drinking and observing "special days." So I really didn't know how much the men's group would have to talk about.

Well, we ended up having the most incredible conversation about this chapter. At the end of it, we were all like, “Wow, that was really great!” And I said, “I feel like the whole church needs to hear the things that we talked about here.” Jim Little said – half-jokingly, I think – “Well, there’s your sermon for Sunday.” And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, “Yeah, that *is* the sermon for this Sunday!” I was hesitant at first, because I didn’t want it to seem like I was changing things up in reaction to the election this past week. But this wasn’t that. This was, “Here is this *really good thing* that we found, and I need to share it with you.” And it *speaks* to the place we find ourselves in after the election, but it’s not *primarily* about that. It speaks to so much *more*.

But before we get into it, can we just stop for a moment to appreciate how great verse 2 is? “Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.” Taken out of context, that is just so totally bizarre. It’s like, “Why is *that* in the Bible?” So let’s talk about it, because it really helps us understand the whole rest of this chapter.

Paul is writing this letter to a group of Christians in Rome, consisting both of Jews who came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, and Gentiles (non-Jews) who have become Christians. Jewish law has a lot of restrictions about what *kind* of meat can be eaten and how it should be *prepared*. Some Jewish Christians thought that they should still abide by that. Some didn’t. But also, most of the meat that they could buy in the marketplaces came from pagan temples. An animal had been sacrificed to a pagan god, and then the meat from that animal was sold in the markets, usually with the money going back to *support* that pagan temple.

So these Christians were faced with the question of, “Are we allowed to eat meat that comes from pagan temples? If we *do*, are we *supporting* the pagan temples?” Some Christians had a

real problem with that and said, “No, we should *not* eat that meat, and just to be safe, we shouldn’t eat *any* meat, because we don’t know exactly where it comes from and what it’s supporting.” Other Christians said, “No, it’s fine. Jesus has made all things clean, and he said that it’s not what goes *in* to your body that makes you unclean but what comes *out* of it. So we can eat it.” In the same way, a lot of the wine that they could buy had been devoted to pagan gods. So some Christians said, “We shouldn’t drink wine, either,” while other Christians said, “No, it’s okay.” Some Christians said, “We still need to observe the Jewish holy days,” while other Christians said, “No, we don’t have to do that anymore.” Some Christians said that the sabbath should still be observed on Saturday, while others said, “No, it should be Sunday, the day that Christ was resurrected.”

So, some Christians had scruples against eating meat, drinking wine, and not observing special days. Paul regards these scruples as unnecessary and says that those who are troubled by these things are “weak” in their faith. If they say, “We can’t eat meat, we can’t drink wine, and we still have to observe these special Jewish holy days,” then Paul says they are weak. They are not strong enough in their faith yet to see that Christ has liberated them from these laws. Those who are *strong* in their faith, Paul says, know that they can eat meat and drink wine and they don’t have to observe special Jewish holy days, because Christ has set them free from that.

But, Paul says, the *strong* must not pass judgment on the *weak*. Because God loves *both* of them – the strong and the weak – and God has brought all of them together into one body, the church. And, he says, each group is doing what they’re doing because they believe it honors God. The “weak” refuse to eat meat and drink wine, and they observe special holy days, because they believe that honors God. The “strong” *eat* meat and *drink* wine, and they don’t worry about observing those special Jewish holy days, because they believe *that* honors God. And Paul’s

response to this is, “Yep. They’re *both* right. They are *both* seeking to honor God, and that’s the whole point, so,” he says, “let all be fully convinced in their own minds. As long as you sincerely believe that what you are doing is being done to honor God, then it is.”

Think about that. As long as you believe that what you are doing is being done to honor God, then it is? So I can justify anything I want to do by saying that it honors God? If I want to sacrifice animals, then I can just say, “Well, the Bible talks about it, and I believe that this is a way of honoring God,” and that makes it okay? If a man wants to have more than one wife, then he can just say, “The Bible talks about this as a way of honoring God, and that’s why I’m doing it,” and that makes it okay? “I’m going to steal money from this huge corporation and give it to those who are poor, because I believe that honors God.”

Now, those are extreme examples that are obviously in violation of civil law, and so they’re *not* okay. And we *are* still bound by those laws of, “You shall not kill,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not commit adultery.” But what about this. Some Christians believe that it honors God for women to be pastors, while other Christians believe that does *not* honor God. Some Christians believe that protecting the lives of the unborn honors God, while other Christians believe that protecting a woman’s right to have an abortion honors God. Some Christians believe that being gay honors God, while other Christians believe that it does not. The list goes on and on. Is Paul saying that *all of them* are right, as long as they are “fully convinced in their own minds” and believe that what they are doing honors God? Is there no *line* as to what is acceptable and what is not? Is it like George Costanza says on *Seinfeld*, “It’s not a lie, if you believe that it’s true.”

Well, that’s *not* what Paul is saying here. What Paul is saying is that it’s not your place to judge someone who believes differently than you do. Because that other person, they’re not serving

you; they don't *belong* to *you*. They belong to God, and they are serving God, and so God will judge them. You don't have to *agree* with them. You don't have to *understand* how they can be Christians by *your* standards. God is not going to judge *you* based on *their* actions, and God is not going to judge *them* based on *your* beliefs. Each one of us will be accountable to God for *our own* faith, not for the faith of others. All *you* need to do, Paul says, is what you believe is faithful and right and honors God, and love this other person, even if they believe differently. Love God, love your neighbor, and leave the judging to God.

What Paul is talking about here is how Christians who believe differently can live together and love one another. Let me say that again, in case you didn't hear me in the back. What Paul is talking about here is how Christians who believe differently can live together and love one another, not just in Rome in 56 A.D., but also in America in 2024, five days after a very divisive election.

Other people in this room believe differently than you do. They voted differently than you did. They have different ideas about what it means to be faithful than you do. You do not have to agree with them. But you *do* have to love them. *I'm* not the one who came up with that rule, and neither is Paul. Jesus is. And if we are going to follow him, then we can't just love the people we like and agree with. We also have to love the people we *don't* always like and *don't* always agree with.

Billy Graham used to say, "It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict. It is God's job to judge. It is *my* job to *love*." The Holy Spirit *convicts*, makes us think, "Man, I might have gotten this wrong." God *judges*, "Yeah, you *did* get this wrong." Our job is to love. And if we get this whole thing wrong, if we err in all of this, may we err on the side of loving *too much* rather than not loving

enough. Because while I have no idea what it will look like when we stand before God one day, I do not think that God will say to us, “Boy, you really loved people *too much*.” I think the bigger concern is God saying, “You were so set on your own ideas of what it means to be faithful and right, that you didn’t love people *enough*.” Because *righteousness* is not about *being right*. It is about being in *right relationship* with God and with each other.

And one of the things that Paul says here is that your beliefs should not *hurt* another person, because that is not loving. There’s the line for what is acceptable and what is not. Is it loving? And remember, love is not just a feeling or an emotion, something that exists in our hearts or our heads. Love is found in our *actions*. Love, according to Paul, is about the ways that we are patient and kind with each other. It is about not being envious or boastful or arrogant or rude with each other. It’s not about insisting on my own way with this other person. It is about not being irritable or resentful with this other person. It’s about not rejoicing in wrongdoing – celebrating when someone makes a mistake or holding it against them and throwing it back in their face. It’s about being truthful with this other person and bearing with them and believing in them and hoping for them and sticking with them no matter what.

If your theology or your politics do not do *that*, if they do not make you a more loving, patient, kind person, then you need to find a new theology and new politics. Because *love is more important* than our *beliefs*. Our beliefs exist to fuel our ability to love God and to love our neighbor. And so if your beliefs aren’t doing that, if your beliefs are making you *judge* people or *hate* people or *hurt* people, you need to reevaluate your beliefs.

Now, what does any of this have to do with Consecration Sunday and pledging for the coming year? Well, the word *consecrate* means “to set apart” or “make holy.” It is about taking

something ordinary and devoting it to a sacred purpose. And so we say that by consecrating our pledges, our money, we are setting it apart for God's purposes. When we baptize, we take ordinary water, and we consecrate it, we set it apart for a sacred purpose. When we share communion, we take ordinary bread and juice and consecrate it, setting it apart for a sacred purpose. We consecrate our ordinary, every day lives to be set apart and used by God for a sacred purpose.

But it is also about consecrating our *church*. Not just the *building*, but the *body*. It is about setting ourselves apart from the rest of the world and devoting ourselves to God's purposes. For the past year, our Transformation Team has been discerning how to do that; how this church can be devoted to God's purposes today. They have done an incredible, faithful job. They have shared their proposal with the Session, and that discussion will be finalized tomorrow night, after which they will be sharing it with you. But at the core of their proposal is a vision for how this church can be a welcoming community where *all people* can experience and share God's love.

It reminds me of the story we read a couple of weeks ago, where a lawyer comes to Jesus and says, "What do you mean *all people*?" Well, "all people" means *all people*. The ones you agree with and the ones you don't. The ones you *like* and the ones you don't.

All people means that conservatives and liberals are welcome and loved here. *All people* means that if you voted for Kamala Harris or Donald Trump or someone else, you are welcome and loved here.

All people means that rich and poor are welcome and loved here.

All people means that black/white/Asian/Latino/Middle Eastern are welcome and loved here.

All people means that Americans and immigrants, documented and undocumented, are welcome and loved here.

All people means that straight people and gay people are welcome and loved here.

All people means that alcoholics and drug addicts are welcome and loved here.

All people means that Christians and non-Christians are welcome and loved here.

All people means that people with learning disabilities, mental and physical disabilities, are welcome and loved here.

All people means that Eagles fans and Giants and Cowboys fans are welcome and loved here.

All people means that people who agree with everything I just said are welcome and loved here, and people who do *not* agree with everything I just said are welcome and loved here.

“All people” means *all people*. You do not have to agree with them, but you *do* have to welcome them and love them. Not just *tolerate* them, but *actively* welcome them and love them. And you know what? If you say, “I don’t know if I can welcome and love someone with whom I fundamentally disagree,” you will *still* be welcome and loved here! Because *all people* deserve to experience the love and welcome of Jesus Christ. All people *need* to experience the love and welcome of Jesus Christ. And, as Paul says, God has *already* welcomed them, and God *already*

loves them, so we should, too. *That* is the kind of church God is calling us to be. *That* is the kind of church that is set apart from the rest of the world that tells you that anyone *different* than you, anyone who *disagrees* with you is your *enemy*, someone you should *fear*.

I have talked to people this week who are *happy* about the outcome of the election, and people who are *upset* about the outcome of the election, and you know what? They are *all* good people. I love *all* of them. I *like* all of them. Because I *know them* beyond their political opinions. There's more to them than that. Our political opinions are not what define us and give us worth. Neither is our race or our gender or our sexuality or our nationality or what kind of clothes we wear or what kind of car we drive. We are defined by the fact that we are all children of God, created in the image of God, who are redeemed and loved by God. Jesus Christ died for *all of us*. So, as Paul says here, "let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."

That is the kind of church that we are trying to build. *That* is the kind of church that your giving is going to create in this coming year. A church where *all* are welcome, *all* are loved, and all people live their lives together before God, encouraging each other to know and love and follow Jesus Christ.

So I want to invite you now, let us consecrate ourselves to that work. If you haven't filled out your pledge card yet, take a moment to do that now, asking God, "What are you calling me to give?" Those of you who are watching online, you can make a pledge through our website. If you are *not* ready to make a pledge yet, you can still take that pledge card and write on the back of it some aspect of your life that you want to offer to God in this coming year. You will *all* be invited to come forward up the center aisle and place your cards in the basket. If you have an offering, you can place it in there, too. Even if you just come forward and say a prayer in your

heart about how you want to give yourself to God, God wants *whatever* it is that you have to offer. So let us consecrate our gifts and our lives and our church to God.