

"Going Deeper: We (All) Belong to God"

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment 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. 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. 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. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. 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. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

"Going Deeper—Faith for Such a Time as This." Those of you who were in worship last Sunday know that we were asking ourselves about that. Just what time is it, we wondered, in our hearts, in our souls?

Well, among other things, it seems to be a time when the preferred mode of communication between groups and individuals is shouting. Volume turned way up! Heavy on gesturing and posturing. Not much real communication happening. To say nothing of creative collaboration and compromise.

We've seen too much of this in Congress, of course. Sometimes it's tempting to think of the "good old days" when things actually got accomplished in those hallowed halls. But our history on that is something of a mixed bag. Listen to this account. Seems that way back in 1798 two Congressmen got into a heated debate with one another. One called the other a scoundrel, a word considered to be a profanity at the time. They were off! So the so-called scoundrel spit in the face of his colleague who responded by hitting him with his cane. Which prompted him to go after him with a pair of fire tongs. All on the floor of Congress!

The name caller went on to be elected Governor of his state and the other guy was reelected to Congress. Those were the days!

We're still learning, aren't we, how to do democracy, how to be the United States of America. We're working at it, and it's my contention that the church, at its best, has something important to offer in this regard. In fact, I recently read of a course at Wesley Theological Seminary, a United Methodist seminary in Washington, D.C., taught by Rev. Kristopher Norris and Mike McCurry. The two are co-directors of the National Capital Semester for Seminarians.

Here's how they describe this initiative: "We see... increasing evidence that our polarization as a society is growing wider; the cleavages in our public discourse becoming deeper. When large segments of our country view those who disagree as "enemies" and when our social networks consist only of those with whom we already agree, there is little basis for the kind of spirited dialogue that can build consensus and make progress on the difficult issues before us. ...there is no "safe [place]" for honest debate.

We firmly believe the church must be a destination for these conversations. ... Why not provoke real discussion, with an openness to having our minds changed by the Spirit through these encounters? We might just discover common ground, and seek ways to organize together for real change to our policies."

The course is designed to teach seminarians how to facilitate and guide such conversations. More power to them! What a gift to the church, to the nation, and to the world. There IS a better way—and we Christians know it, or should know it. Listen again to the Apostle Paul:

"Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions... 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. So then, each of us will be accountable to God."

Paul was writing to a new Christian community in Rome that included people from very different traditions and world views. There was tension around appropriate religious practices between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. These were not trivial matters, but rather deep doctrinal issues which led some in the community to seek to exclude others, with whom they disagreed, from the fellowship of the church.

It doesn't take much of a leap of faith to get from that sort of scenario to what we see going on today within Congress and even within the church itself. As one commentator wrote: "Whatever your side, if you see any controversy dividing today's church as a basis for exclusion of fellowship, Paul is speaking to you."

From the church in Rome in the year 50 or so, to the church of right now. It's so tempting isn't it, to go from "I'm right," to "therefore you must be wrong," to "therefore, you have no business even being here."

Paul observes this going on, and says: "Stop." "No." You've missed the claim of the Gospel, the claim on us all. "We do not live to ourselves," he writes, "and we do not die to ourselves. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." Another way to say it: we belong to God. We all belong to God. Always.

OK, Paul. Having made that claim, how do we do it? How do we live that way? How do we go deeper and find a faith for such a time as this?

Well, the seminarians at Wesley Seminary are busy learning how, and I'm very grateful for that. What are some clues from Paul for us?

He's clearly not saying that we should stop advocating for our particular views. He's not suggesting a kind of milk-toast "tolerance" that is fundamentally disconnected with a "whatever!" attitude. Not at all. Paul knows that this is serious stuff, even life and death stuff, over which we differ. But he IS speaking to the spirit in which we engage one another. And that requires deep and very difficult spiritual work our part. If you're acquainted with the non-violence, say, of Martin Luther King, Jr., you know that it means non-violence of word, of deed, and of heart.

As one commentator puts it: "The radicality of Paul's passion here is the radicality of grace, the radicality of life lived beyond judgement...our spirit for and toward those with whom we bitterly disagree is Paul's focus."

The overarching, transcending truth, Paul reminds us, is that we are the Lord's, and thus our relation to every other being is mediated by our relation to God.

This is so deep. We don't realize it when we sing it each week. "I am a child of God," we sing each week, forgetting maybe that it doesn't only apply to children. "You are God's child, it's true. Children of God are called to love one another, as Jesus taught to do."

If we belong to God, we belong to each other. And so Mother Teresa realized: "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

How do we get from here, where we are now, to there, a place that honors the other, wants the best for the other, respects the other? One way is to go deep into our own Scriptures, as we are doing in this sermon series. The questions we ponder, the challenges we face, are not new to us or unique to us. And the Word of God can be a lamp unto our feet, a light unto our path.

Another way is to study and learn, so come and listen and learn in today's Book Study as we learn about Muslims and the Making of America.

Another is to pray, and to pray together. It's what we do here. We pray together each week, and we also seek opportunities to intentionally pray with Christians of other denominations and with our interfaith sisters and brothers. I was surprised to learn recently that something similar is going on right in Congress itself. Imagine that, in light of all the bad press they're getting. The weekly Senate prayer breakfast brings together several dozen senators, liberals and conservatives, and includes Christians, Jews, Mormons, Buddhists. Some of the members report that relationships developed there have made possible some important bi-partisan work.

We are accountable, Paul reminds us, for who we are and how we live. We are accountable to God. Not an angry and judging God, but a God of grace. A God of love. A love so deep and broad that we can scarcely take it in. We sing it in the hymn we so love, written by John Newton, former slave trader transformed by grace into minister and abolitionist. Grace for me. Grace for you. Grace for every one of God's children and for the whole creation. Amazing grace.

"Through many dangers, toils, and snares, we have already come. 'Tis grace that brought us safe thus far. And grace will lead us all home."

May we all go deeper—and discover that our old home is become our new home through the grace and love of God.
AMEN

Notes:

Thelma Raker Coffone. "Violence in the U.S. Congress: Fistfights on the Senate Floor."
Updated on May 24, 2016
soapboxed.com

Kristopher Norris & Mike McCurry "Church should be a sanctuary for difficult conversations."
September 12, 2017, Baltimore-Washington Conference UMC.

William Greenway and David L. Bartlett in Feasting on the Word. Year A, Vol. 4. Bartlett and Taylor, eds.
Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.2011.

"Prayer Partners." The Christian Century, Sept. 13 2017.

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