

## ***Centered Faith***

**Matthew 18:21-22** Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

**Romans 14:1-13a** Welcome the person who is weak in faith--but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. <sup>2</sup> One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand). <sup>5</sup> One person considers some days to be more sacred than others, while another person considers all days to be the same. Each person must have their own convictions. <sup>6</sup> Someone who thinks that a day is sacred thinks that way for the Lord. Those who eat, eat for the Lord, because they thank God. And those who don't eat, don't eat for the Lord, and they thank the Lord too.

<sup>7</sup> We don't live for ourselves and we don't die for ourselves. <sup>8</sup> If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore whether we live or die, we belong to God. <sup>9</sup> This is why Christ died and lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. <sup>10</sup> But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on your brother or sister? We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup> Because it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God. <sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. <sup>13</sup> So stop judging each other.

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About twelve years ago, I was in the loudspeaker testing laboratory that I had constructed for my employer. I had been measuring various technical parameters on some loudspeakers and was fairly happy with what I found, so it was time to put some music on and see how they sounded. One of my favorite CDs for doing this was a Capella group of men's voices singing some old gospel music. As the music filled the lab, the door burst open and in walked the president of the company. He immediately began to sing with the recording in a rich, full, and powerful baritone voice that I didn't know he had. When the song ended, he began to praise that gospel harmony as pleasing in God's ear, and rant that so much of the music in church these days was really sacrilegious. It just wasn't reverent or respectful. He really felt very strongly and very certain about the subject. I guess after centuries of Jews chanting the Psalms, centuries of Gregorian chant by devout monks and priests, after the rollicking hymns of the early Protestants who put sacred words to familiar beer drinking songs, at last a little church in the wildwood sang "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder" in four part harmony – and God leaned back on a cloud, heaved a big sigh, and said, "At last! They finally got it right!"

There are times when each of us is a bit like my old boss. Unconsciously, we're pretty certain that God likes what we like, and conversely, God is disgusted by the same things we are. How could God possibly like "The Old Rugged Cross" played by extremely loud and wailing electric guitars? On top of that, we're far more comfortable with certainty than we are with change. And, as we talked about last Sunday, we like clear definitions of what is good and what is bad, what is moral and what isn't, what is church and worship and what is unacceptable and unsuitable.

Then we construct a *boundaried* church. We define the limits. You can't enter if your behavior or your beliefs don't match up with those inside the boundary. The boundary might keep out people who don't wear a tie. The boundary has been used to

keep out people who want their children to be baptized. Boundaries have been built over slavery, over the right kind of bread to use for communion, over ordaining women, over who has what sort of authority in the church, and on and on the list goes, all through the history of the church, right up to the present day.

A bounded church seeks unity through uniformity. Everyone believes the right beliefs. Their behavior conforms to certain clear standards. There's a sureness that all necessary knowledge is revealed and understood. The church tends to withdraw into itself to maintain its purity. It's dangerous to have a church of like-minded people. It leads to self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, stagnation, and pride. In any given month, Thomasville has about 100 churches. One of the major reasons is that many of them are churches that are certain that they have the truth, the certain truth of what to believe, the clear rules of morality and action that are required by God. Unfortunately, other churches around them are impure. Those churches are corrupted in some way. And so, each of them erects their boundaries to shield their purity and they harden into a pious ghetto.

This happens in tiny store-front churches and in huge megachurches. The problem is that, try as they might, the boundary always has a crack in it somewhere. Eventually, an idea seeps in that doesn't match the vision of truth that the boundary is supposed to protect. Because there has been certainty about what is righteous and true within the boundary, any thought that creeps in that doesn't conform is seen as impure, corrupting, heresy. Conflict erupts. People might get ejected from the church like disruptive patrons thrown out of a bar. If the corrupting ideas infect too many people, the situation can become a church fight, which leads to a church split.

There, in a nutshell, is much of the history of the Christian church. The split can be huge, like when the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox split back in the eleventh century. It can be a local split like First Baptist experienced here in Thomasville. It can be the ugly breakup of a small store-front church - like seems to happen with regularity here in town. Does it have to be this way? Is this just a natural, inevitable cycle? Paul, writing to the Romans, says, "Absolutely not!"

It's extremely difficult for us to understand just how big some issues were in Paul's day. There were four major areas that made a Jew stick out like a sore thumb in the ancient world. One was the Sabbath day of rest. Nobody else took a day off every week. One was dietary restrictions. Jews had weird rules about what was acceptable to eat and what was absolutely forbidden, anathema, and disgusting. The third thing was the physical mark of circumcision of males. The fourth was the worship of only one God and refusal to recognize or accept any other gods. These things were central and defining to Jews. Jews were used to being outsiders. They were protected and preserved by the boundaries that shielded them from outside corruption.

But now, there were Jewish followers of Jesus and gentile followers of Jesus coming together under one roof to worship God and to learn of Jesus. To the gentiles, the Jews were a bunch of uptight, holier-than-thou, weirdoes. To the Jews, the gentiles were uncouth, irreverent, and unclean. They were likely to show up wearing clothes made of two kinds of materials, they failed to ritually wash their hands before eating, and they were likely to bring a bit of pork to the covered dish meal after worship and then expect to participate in communion. It was so disgusting that it made you want to vomit!

That is what Paul talks about in this passage. "One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables." Paul refuses to take sides. He says that they must not judge each other. What's more, Paul says that God accepts both of them. Last Sunday, we looked at the chapter before today's text. Do you remember the point? God loves us before we are even aware that God exists. God loves us when

we mess up. God refuses to stop loving us. And God calls us to love one another in the same way.

Paul tells us that there will be differences of opinion, but it isn't our job to judge each other. God has welcomed people with whom we disagree, so who are we to build boundaries? A little humility is in order. Maya Angelou put it so succinctly – "While I know myself as a creation of God, I am obligated to realize and remember that everyone else and everything else are also God's creation." Can we be united without being uniform? Can we be in solidarity without being the same? Can we accept each other without demanding that others be assimilated into our view? If so, we reflect God's transcending love and all-encompassing welcome. And as we have seen, one of the greatest threats to the church all through the ages is the mistaken belief that we can't be one if we aren't the same.

The way to do that is by being a centered church. A centered church holds fast to a few central, foundational things. Paul says that one of those things is that in life and in death we belong to God. We often quote this passage at funerals to comfort ourselves that the deceased belongs to God. God claims them and we can be at peace knowing that they rest in peace. But it's a two –pronged claim. The other half is that in life we belong to God. We can find strength and confidence knowing that the everlasting arms of God support us in life as well as cradle us in death. Being centrally aware that we belong to God gives us strength, but it also gives us direction. We are Christians. That title, that term, means that we are followers of Christ. It's important to us to know what Jesus taught. It's important to us to know what Jesus did. It's essential to us to go where he went, follow where he led, to be imitators of Christ, to be of the same mind as Christ.

So much of what we worry about pales in significance. So much distracts our attention and our energy away from Jesus. In our fretting over wanting to be right and cast others as being wrong. Our attention slips from Jesus and focuses on building boundaries. Rather than always remembering that God has welcomed even those with whom we disagree, we turn toward disagreeing and trying to win the argument.

When our faith is centered, then we are free to listen to each other, learn from each other, celebrate the opportunities to explore and consider ideas other than our own. That deepens and enriches our faith. It makes the church more alive and resilient. At our best – we love, honor, and respectfully listen. We are set free from the smallness of our own vision, so we may grow and become more than we were, rather than stagnate and wither.

At our worst – we despise one another, pass judgment, and break ties with each other. Being a community is hard. We have to put higher value on right relationships than on being right. Inevitably that means we have to forgive. We are expected to forgive repeatedly, not just seven times, but over and over. After all, not only has God forgiven us repeatedly innumerable times, but our brothers and sisters have also forgiven us repeatedly. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,  
Center your attention and energy on God's steadfast love.  
Anchor yourself firmly in Christ's life and teachings.  
Do not build walls between you and your neighbor,  
But reach out in love.