

## **"AT GOD'S TABLE"**

**Romans 14:1-12**

**September 17, 2017**

*14 Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.*

*2-4 For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.*

*5 Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience.*

*6-9 What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's*

*why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.*

*<sup>10-12</sup> So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in Scripture:*

*"As I live and breathe," God says,  
" every knee will bow before me;  
Every tongue will tell the honest truth  
that I and only I am God."*

*So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.*

Have you ever played the party game, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" This is the one where you go around the table or Livingroom and state the three people from history that you would like to invite to your table for dinner. These could be well-known figures, like Eisenhower or Genghis Khan (although he might dampen your appetite somewhat). They could be family members or friends that have passed on, like your grandmother or your friend from college. Or they could be fictional characters like Superman or Little Red Riding Hood. If you invite them, you had better clarify that the invitation is just for one

guest; otherwise, you might get some other unsavory characters at your table.

In this game, there are no rules for who you can invite, but you have to state your reasons why. It's so funny now that I am a minister; whenever I play this game, somebody always mentions Jesus as one of the guests and then shoots me an "Am-I-going-to-heaven-now-that-I've-invited-Jesus-into-my-home kind of look!"

Actually, Jesus is the number one answer in Christian households playing this game. There are so many questions we would like to ask:

- Were you totally human, or were you totally divine, the literal son of God?
- Where did you get all your wisdom and your knowledge?
- Where were you for the first 30 years of your life?
- Did you ever marry and have children?
- What would you have done if you had lived another 20 years?

These are just some of my questions; I'm sure you have your own. So it might be fun to have Jesus at the dinner table some night. But then again, maybe not. Maybe Jesus would spend the entire meal lecturing the host about what she or he wasn't doing to build the kingdom of God.

Maybe he would exhort us to give away all of our possessions to the poor. That's a tough one. We would probably avert his gaze at that one.

Maybe he would call us out on our falsehoods, or tell us a confusing parable about how we are wasting our energies, or maybe he would even be more direct with us.

Yes, I suspect Jesus could be a real buzzkill at the 21<sup>st</sup> century American dinner table! Besides that, if you really had Jesus at the table, why would you want to invite anyone else? Ok, maybe Buddha or Mohammed so they could all square off and prove who started the best religion, but no, I think not.

Paul tells his Roman church to stop bickering over who in the eyes of God is right and who is wrong, who is more faithful and who is less, and who is free from sin and who is to be condemned. These are the types of one-upsmanship games that are played in every social setting, and churches are no exception.

We have to have leaders, or nothing gets done. We have to have rules, or no one knows how to fit into the structure. And we have to have conventions, or else there only is chaos.

Paul tells his church to invite everyone to the table, and let God sort out the seating chart from there. Paul warns his church that they will someday be accountable personally to God for how Christ was welcomed at their table.

I think Paul is onto something here. But how are we to apply his teaching to our own conduct as Christians and as members of this church?

Dr. William Greenway is a professor of Philosophical Theology at Austin Presbyterian Seminary. He has long been an advocate of women in professional, ordained ministry, and he is an ardent supporter within the Presbyterian tradition that queer folk who are otherwise qualified should be ordained to ministry and able to serve their congregations honestly and openly about who they really are.

In a commentary essay he recently wrote on this passage from Romans, Dr. Greenway reminds us as Christians that,

*Once we stop seeing the other person as a child of God and view him or her instead as the personification of a sin, it becomes easy to enjoy the energy of disdain and self-righteous opposition.*

I'm as guilty of this as the next person. Today

in our country, we have many persons in public life that we readily demonize. Depending on our point of view or our particular pet peeves and causes, we might readily attack the President, or the Governor, or the Pope, or the leader of the Black Lives Matter movement, or any one of a whole host of people and causes that make us uncomfortable.

It's so easy to attack; it is much harder to give grace. And I truly am speaking out of my own experience here, and maybe I am speaking as well out of yours, too. On a nationwide scale, one thing is common to us all—there are more than enough targets in public life for us to vilify.

There are many hateful docks for us to tie our ships to, many divided highways that we can travel, and many topics that have become “no fly zones” at our dinner tables. As we approach Thanksgiving as our next big family holiday, who will we be excluding from our table this year for their politics? Who in our families or in our former groups of friends will refuse to come share a cup and meal with us over lingering hard feelings about the Presidential election? Is Jesus even welcome to sit down and break bread with us, given all the rancor in our hearts and the hurtful words still hanging in the air?

This is what Paul is warning his church about, that demonizing the opposition does not make for better Christians, but rather, Christians pushing away from the table where all sinners are welcome. In verse 8,

Paul reminds us that, in the NRSV translation, "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

When we look back to Paul's context, in the early church, there was a great deal of jockeying for position and authority. As rules were made, rule followers were rewarded and those who were perceived as rule-breakers were singled out, ridiculed, and ostracized from the church body. Paul saw his Roman churches breaking apart from infighting. But was he seeing far into the future as well?

I think Bill Greenway paraphrases very well Paul's ethical framework for a Christian church based in love rather than in law. He says it in these words:

*First and last, we argue for the right and struggle for the good, not for the sake of ourselves or our own opinions or identity—or even for the sake of the church, justice, or the good—but because we are moved by love and concern for every particular other, which is to say, because in life and in death we belong to God.*

How do you relate to this affirmation? Do you believe that you belong to God? Is that belonging the central value that you hold in your life? Or do you sometimes, like me, put other loves and other devotions in front of God? Yes, sure, nothing in my life takes priority

over worship of God on Sunday mornings, but I have my vices and I have my weak spots and I have persons I demonize and I have idols I adore and I am not, by a long shot, a perfect Christian! Not by a long shot.

Jesus would be the first to tell me that at the dinner table, but he would also be the first to pray for me and to forgive me for all my failings. He would love me anyway, and I take much comfort in this, as I hope you do also.

That's right, despite all my failings, I belong to God. As do you all. As do all the people you hate, all the people you love, all the people you wish would dry up and blow away, and all the people you miss that you wish could share just one more piping hot meal with you at your table.

We are God's children. And so are they. We are God's hands and hearts in the world. And as hard as it is, those hands must reach across the aisles and those hearts must be big enough to carry the pain of others inside them.

Who will we invite to our dinner tables this Fall? If we answer, "Jesus," then we better be ready for what follows in the door behind him. It may be the poor beggar. It may be the tax collector. It might

be the prostitute, the leper, and some hungry disciples who haven't had a bath in a very long time. If we invite Superman, then we better set a place for Lex Luther. If we invite Little Red Riding Hood, then we better be prepared to usher into our lives the Big Bad Wolf.

Better get into the kitchen—God's children are hungry out there.

May it Be So.