

Message for September 27, 2020

Romans 14:1-12

As a part of my training for ministry I spent the summer of 1981 doing a chaplaincy course at Toronto Western Hospital. The course had two supervisors one being a United Church minister and the other a Roman Catholic priest. There were about twenty of us students and we came from many different denominations; Presbyterian, United, Anglican and Roman Catholic for the most part. Despite all our differences however, we became a very close knit group. All was well until the end.

It was suggested that we ought to celebrate communion as a part of our last worship service together. It was agreed that this was a great idea but the question was raised; who would officiate? The Roman Catholic students couldn't take communion from the Protestant chaplain while the Roman Catholic chaplain was not allowed to give communion to the Protestants. The result was a debate that escalated into an argument that led to a major blow-up with people literally storming out of the room. Old biases and antagonisms reared their head and it seemed as if a summer's worth of ecumenical peace and goodwill was quickly going down the drain. Eventually everyone had left the room except for me and one other Presbyterian student. She looked at me and then burst into tears sobbing, "Why can't we all just get along?"

Why can't we all just get along? It's an age old question isn't it? Sometimes spouses argue and children bicker. People don't always get along at work and neighbours sometimes have their differences. Nations certainly don't always get along and neither do those who make up a nation; all we have to do is look at our neighbours to the south caught up in their very bitter presidential election. Our own country and society isn't immune either and tensions are perhaps heightened by the pandemic with all of its fears and stresses. Even within the church profound disagreements and upsets sometimes happen. When they do people sometimes ask, "Why can't we just get along the way people did back in the days of the early church? To ask this however is to look at the past

through rose coloured glasses. The truth is that God's people have never always got along and we can think of the congregation in Rome for example.

The church in Rome, like so many congregations before and since, had its troubles and there were two main areas of disagreement. The first, which may seem rather odd to us, was whether or not Christians were allowed to eat meat. Now contrary to what some might think at first, the debate was not over the morality of killing and eating animals. Rather the issue was where the animals were killed. A major source of meat in the ancient world was the local temples; the animals were sacrificed to the various gods and then the meat was sold to support the temples. Now some people in the congregation insisted that there was no way a good Christian could possibly eat such meat; to do so was to support that temple! What this meant in practical terms was that they became vegetarians. Others in the congregation though didn't see anything wrong with buying and eating the meat; doing so didn't mean that they were worshiping the pagan idols!

As if that wasn't enough though, the congregation's members also argued over which day of the week was the most appropriate to worship God. Some said that they should be worshiping on Saturdays since that day had been the Sabbath for God's people since the days of Moses. Others in the congregation though had switched from Saturday to Sunday since that was the day that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Arguing about food and the day of worship made for an unhappy situation and it was Paul's task to help them out.

In his letter Paul told them the same thing that he had already told other congregations that had found themselves in a similar mess. First of all, it really didn't matter whether or not they ate the meat. Those who didn't were following their conscience and honouring God. Likewise, those who did eat it were following their conscience and doing what they thought was right. Likewise it really didn't matter on which day they worshiped God either. They could keep tradition and worship God on Saturday or break tradition and worship on a Sunday; it really didn't matter! What really

mattered was that they did worship! Indeed, Paul said that there was an even greater issue or principle at stake; that of Christian love. Even as the Romans passionately argued with one another, did they still love one another? Did they still respect one another? If they didn't then it didn't matter who was right or wrong because they had missed the point altogether. Love was the key, it was back then and it still is today.

The truth is that if we are true to our conscience, we will not always agree with one another. Nevertheless no matter how strongly or passionately we may disagree, we must still strive to love and love as the Bible understands it is simply treating others as we ourselves wish to be treated. Of course it must be admitted that this can be far easier said than done. In fact sometimes doing this even seems to go against our very nature.

Several years ago there was a news clip on TV about that day's events at the CNE. A part of the clip showed a family walking down the midway and all were obviously having a good time. The family consisted of a mother, father and two kids, a boy who was about five or six and his younger sister. The girl was carrying a big inflatable mallet and without any warning or provocation, she suddenly hauled off and clobbered her brother over the head with it! It wouldn't have hurt him but the boy's face screwed up in tears of rage and protest, but before he could utter a sound the camera switched over to something else.

Now no real harm was done but I wondered. Why did the little girl do it? Would she have liked it if he had done the same thing to her? It almost seems to be a part of our nature to sometimes, figuratively speaking, clobber one another over the head by the things we say and do. And then we wonder why we don't get along! To get along means taking Jesus' command to love seriously and this does not always come easily. Consider this true story from the writer Jim Taylor.

"It was a tense, very difficult meeting. The committee had been dealing with the problem of an employee who had committed a theft.

‘This business cannot function with people who are thieves,’ said one of the members of the committee. There was widespread agreement.

‘I think a rule is a rule,’ said the manager. ‘All of the employees will be watching us to see if we enforce the rules.’

‘As I see it, this is a cut-and-dried case. She admitted that she stole the money. She knows that it is wrong. It’s as simple as that,’ chimed a third.

At length, one of our colleagues spoke up, a rather quiet person not known for her leadership. ‘I think our company ought to be the sort of place where people are more important even than good rules. As you say, she has admitted her guilt. There are mitigating circumstances – her marriage situation, her two children. None of that excuses this. But I don’t think she is asking to be excused. I think she is asking us to give her another chance. I would like all of our employees to know that this is the sort of company where someone can make a terrible, tragic mistake and yet be given a second chance.’

And in that tension filled, darkened room, wrote Taylor, the light shone.”

As Taylor wrote, the light shone because, one person, as difficult or even as distasteful as it may have been for her, chose to treat another as no doubt she would wish to be treated in the same circumstances. The light shone because she chose to love.

I began today’s message with the story of an unhappy episode from almost forty years ago and I ended my account with myself and a fellow student sitting alone in the room together. That however is not the end of the story. The next day we all came together again and the room was full of tension; the harsh words of the previous day had neither been forgotten nor forgiven. Then the Roman Catholic priest spoke up saying that since the Roman Catholic students could not take communion from the Protestant chaplain, he would celebrate communion for all of us. I asked

him how he could do that since his own church's rules quite firmly said that he couldn't give communion to us Protestants. His reply was that he knew what his church's rules were but he had decided to follow his conscience. "I have no problem celebrating communion for you" he said. "Do you have a problem taking communion from me?" The answer was 'no' and so it was done. The differences remained and they were very real but even so we still came together as a community of faith; we did so simply because of the decision to love, to treat one another as we ourselves wished to be treated.