

Message: "Judgement's Quandary"

Scripture: Romans 14:1-12

¹⁴Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those 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. ⁴Who 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. ⁵Some 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. ⁶Those 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. ⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If 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. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰Why 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. ¹¹For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Many of you know my wife is an eighth-grade language arts teacher at Meadowhill Middle School in southern Missoula. Many of you know that school just started and has been underway for a few weeks. And many of you know that the beginning of school can be a very challenging time for all involved, especially challenging for students who are new to the school system.

Well, this past week, a new student at Meadowhill Middle School was having a particularly rough week. My wife told me about it; this student was brand new to the school and had no background with it. He had come from a much rougher area of our country and had great difficulty making friends in our city. It was obvious to me that he was acting as a frightened outsider would act; he had become terribly withdrawn and non-cooperative with the teaching staff over time. From the accounts of my wife, this student was known for doing the wrong kinds of things - he'd dress in clothes that were never washed; he didn't listen to teachers trying to help him; and he didn't mix with any of the other students. Things came to a head this past week, however, when he did something that caught everyone off guard; he was so traumatized, so frightened, so disoriented that he climbed the sixty-foot tree just outside the main entrance to the school - and he stayed there overnight.

Here's a picture of him up in that tree (slide).

OK, so we're not talking about a human student, but a bear that came to school this past week. He was up in that tree for two nights, I believe, and eventually migrated to a different tree on school grounds but it was away from the front entrance. Eventually, he moved to a tree to the south of the school, which is in the right direction to get out of the city. The reason he did so was the

school did a pretty good job of alerting the students and teachers and staff, and even the neighbors around the school, as to the best policy to help the bear to return to safety. They advised people to give the bear space, time, and understanding. Space in that they encouraged people to stay away; time in that the bear determined how long this would go on; and understanding, in that most times, when an animal is in a bad place at a bad time, they will figure it out on their own, and aggressive actions are simply not necessary.

Our human interactions could learn a lot from this successful experience, I believe. There are a lot of people out there, and not just students, who probably feel like that treed bear - stuck in a place where things really aren't OK, and looking desperately for a way down.

Paul has a word for those of us who hope to help treed bears - and it is a word in two parts. For one, Paul is letting us know how easily we tree bears ourselves. Not bears, of course, and not actual trees, but we humans have a terribly efficient tendency to make others feel like outcasts, like they are somehow lesser or wrong - and if you doubt me, take a look at one day's worth of conversation in your own personal life experience. How often did a conversation turn to gossip, even a tiny bit? Did eyes roll, even a little, at the mention of a specific person? Were you or the other person all too happy to point out someone else's flaw? And then, to those who say to themselves "Oh, I don't speak in such ways; I don't gossip or roll my eyes or point out other people's flaws...." - HOW OFTEN DID YOU THINK SUCH THINGS? How often did the other person think such things? I don't know about you, but my DNA has a gene devoted to criticizing others, and I must keep it in check; I believe we all have that gene as well. It's what makes us human, and it does have its place in helping us discern what is right and true and helpful by looking at the opposites; but such discernment always goes too far if it becomes our preoccupation.

Paul is bringing this tendency to light. He targets vegetarianism as an example: "²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those 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. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" We have to get past the part where Paul says that those who eat only vegetables are weak, which is pretty easy to do, because some of the strongest, healthiest people I know are vegetarians; but that was something thought back then. The point Paul is making is that we fail our faith when we take the post of judgement on such matters; God

has placed variety into creation, a vast variety full of choices for living that are able to keep God's love at its center. Our concern should never be only what someone eats or wears or says or does - we should always seek to connect what others eat or wear or say or do with the love Christ revealed to be the grounding of all things, the love we are to practice everywhere.

This brings us to Paul's second word to us regarding differences like these - and it basically follows along the lines of how to deal effectively with a treed bear. Give space, time, and understanding their proper place. Make room in conversation and thought for the difference of opinion presented to you; do not judge nor prejudge things that sound wrong to your ear; give them a proper hearing, make an authentic effort to understand, and refuse to condense any person down to their most troubling perspective. Time and space help understanding to grow; and seeking to understand shows us how important time and space are to the process.

Many are the times when I experience as a pastor someone telling me something that I automatically think is wrong, harmful, misguided, or otherwise completely unnecessary. It is in those moments that I find the holding of one's tongue can feel like holding back the floodwaters of reason with a popsicle stick; it always feels like my head or heart will explode as I work to maintain my composure and remain engaged. But I persist in that effort for the simple reason that without a proper hearing, without taking the time and making the effort to understand, my initial impulses would often mislead me. I might cut off deeper understandings that God wishes me to receive. Added to this is the fact that I have been proven wrong too many times for me to trust my own perceptions completely; I have been graced with clarities and comprehensions from others that would have evaded me but for the patience my faith insisted upon, to learn more about the differences between people, to seek to understand before any hint of judgement, and to know that such expenditure of time is one of the most worthwhile things we can do.

We must remember that everyone's faith is a continuum, not a final product. We are all works in progress. The most dangerous and deluded Christians of any age have always been those who considered themselves arrived at a place of completion and thus able to level judgement upon others. Paul says nonsense to this; faith is never to be seen as a position of superiority over others, but of collaboration with others on the journey that follows Jesus. Those who boast of their faith have already lost the point of faith and do nothing but highlight the

weakness of their faith; but those who fully accept that there is always more to learn are able to maintain the openness required to approach God's immensity. We learn how to love God, just as we learn how to love each other and ourselves - and the learning must be ongoing if the love is to continue. There are no short-cuts.

Craig Kocher is associate dean of the chapel and director of religious life at Duke University; he shares this helpful insight regarding Paul's counsel:

"Just as we cannot choose which family we are born into, we cannot choose who God will call into Christ's body in baptism. We do not have to like them. We do have to love them. The goal of being together in the body of Christ is not to agree or get along. The hope is to help one another become more Christlike, to love God and neighbor in ever more praising ways. The logic of grace in this sense points not toward winning, but toward holiness. The contours of grace are measures of freedom precisely in how we conduct ourselves in relationship to others."

Let's put this into plain language: That person who drives you crazy with their opinions or ideas? That individual who you simply can't understand? That one who doesn't play by the rules most people take for granted? That character who is embarrassing to be around, who says all the wrong things or does things backwards?

There's something of God to be learned there in the midst of that disconnect. And perhaps it is something to be learned in no other way than to love them fully - to give them the space, time, and understanding to reveal their own work in progress, a progress we can then pursue together.