

Deeply Committed but Different 2024
Romans 14:108, 10, 13 Mark 9:38-42

Romans 14:1-8, 10, 13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Welcome 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. 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. ¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

Mark 9:38-42 (New Revised Standard Version)

³⁸John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. ⁴²"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

Lately I've been remembering, **reflecting & re-evaluating** my ministry and truthfully, some of my decisions I regret & would like a do-over.

But one of my better decisions that I think I got just right was when I served a church along the North Carolina coast, & many of our visitors were folks with weekend beach houses. Since there weren't any Quaker meetinghouses in our area, a family of very faithful Quakers found their way to our church.

During the mid-1600's, Christians were killing other Christians in terrible and vicious religious wars over differences in faith.

In England after more than 4 decades of brutal and bloody fighting, of Christians slaughtering other believers over religious purity, George Fox **rejected outward religious practices**, all of them.

Those who agreed and followed him became known as the Quakers, who focused on quiet prayer, inner peace and reflection, rather than performing religious practices and rituals.

Baptism practices became an especially divisive issue, so Quakers moved to a "spiritual baptism" without actually using any water.

Eventually that family moved into their beach house full time,

and they got very involved in the life of our congregation,
singing in the choir and participating in our activities.
They were deeply committed Christians, faithful to Scripture,
and certainly fit our life together in the Presbyterian Church.
I enjoyed, admired & respected their faith & dedication to God.

One evening Kathy and I were invited to their home to share a meal.
We talked a lot about Quaker beliefs and being Presbyterian,
then Bill and Elaine inquired about joining the church.

They explained that it was important for me to understand
that they were not rejecting their Quaker faith and traditions,
but had experienced the same commitment to Jesus Christ
and that our church seemed compatible with their faith.

I was delighted that they finally wanted to join our church family.
I also knew that Quakers stress the work of the Holy Spirit,
and seeing baptism as entirely spiritual, don't use water.

So does the amount of water used determine the validity of a baptism?

Our Presbyterian Directory for worship allows some flexibility,
but I wasn't sure about a baptism that didn't involve any water.
I had never heard of a Presbyterian being dry-cleaned.

I knew the family well, the authenticity and depth of their faith,
and I was pretty sure that God approved of their waterless-baptism,
but I wasn't as sure about the Presbyterian Church.

I asked about getting baptized with water, and they said, "no",
because that would deny the validity of their Quaker baptism,
and understandably, they weren't willing to do that.

I knew there was a Presbytery meeting the next day in Wilmington,
so I suggested that I'd ask wiser and more experienced pastors,
and we agreed that we'd each pray and seek further guidance.

As it happened some very respected professors that I had in seminary,
and the more experienced pastors I'd expected, were at the meeting,
so I felt much relieved knowing that surely they would guide me.

When I described my waterless baptism – church membership dilemma,
the professors agreed that it certainly was a fascinating question,
and the wiser and more experienced pastors all told me
that they had never heard of a Quaker even
wanting to join a Presbyterian church before ...
... and they all asked I'd let them know how I finally worked it out.
One of the professors even urged me to write an article about it,
once I'd figured out how to resolve the Quaker baptism question.

That evening, I spent several hours in deep prayer and study.
Eventually I recognized that what it came to down to was,
what it means to be a faith family and community of grace,
and I focused on whether it was more likely that God
wanted me to exclude or wanted me to welcome & affirm?

In Romans, Paul is addressing a similar issue and question.
As the early Church grew and spread beyond Jewish believers,
it became more complicated to separate faith from Judaism.

The two issues stirring things up among the Christians in Rome,
had to do with food restrictions and keeping Jewish Holy days,
which were seen very differently & were quite divisive
between the Jewish believers and Gentile believers.

But Paul as a theologian recognized that we are **saved by grace alone**,
which meant that Jewish religious rituals were far less relevant.

**But Paul was also not willing to let that difference
split the church or destroy their unity in Christ.**

As Paul explains, loving other Christians and valuing them
matters far more than what we eat or if we keep Holy days.
Salvation is all God's grace, not anything that we do.

**The critical truth is that we are one faith family
and that now we belong to God and not to ourselves.**

Notice how forcefully Paul writes about this. vs. 4~8

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. ... 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.**

Paul's point, is that we belong to God and we are the Lord's servants.
Scripture, our conscience, Christian fellowship help guide us.

Christians on both sides of the issues were God's loved & precious,
and the differences dividing them were not the Lord's priority, vs. 10

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?

**The question is, does it honor God as an expression of our faith?
- does it deepen our walk of faith with the Lord?
and does it build-up the body of Christ, the Church?**

Paul was explaining and insisting to the Christians in Rome,
that as those united by Christ's death and resurrection,
by that grace, we are called to live with our differences
for the sake of God's will and Christian community.

**Paul's perspective raises some very important questions.
Do I trust God's power, sovereignty, wisdom judgment
enough to wait and be patient & allow God work it out?**

And am I insisting that I must defend, and that I must attack,
as if the Lord isn't capable of fulfilling the divine will?

It is therefore, not our place to criticize God's other servants,
because we are all God's children saved only by God's gracious love,
and we all share the same humble rank in God's household.

So who are we to reject who or what the Lord has claimed and approved?

The Gospel lesson from Mark also deals with this same issue, vs. 38,

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

"You're not a fireman, how dare you put out that fire & rescue me."
"You're not a lifeguard, how dare you save me from drowning."
"You're not one of us,

how dare you cast out a demon in the name of Jesus.”

But Jesus disagrees with John. He is willing for good to be done,
even if done by those who are not his recognized followers. vs. 39,

But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power **in my name** will be able soon
afterward to speak evil of me.

Though he wasn't one of the 12 disciples,

he was doing a good deed as an expression of faith in Jesus, vs. 41-42,

For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear **the name of Christ** will by
no means lose the reward. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it
would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

Jesus is using rhetorical hyperbole to emphasize a point ---

- even something as minor as a cup of water to drink
is welcome, appreciated and will be rewarded by God ...

**... so don't criticize the faith-efforts and work of others,
or cause one of my little-ones, a babe in Christ to stumble.**

Our faith journey is

a life-long process of spiritual development and discernment,
and not everyone arrives at the same place at the same time,
but since God is sovereign and the Lord is in charge.

We're called to trust God's wisdom & power to complete
the fulfilment of God's grace, plan, will & purpose.

**Criticism and complaint are never an effective motivator,
but takes away our joy and interferes with God's grace,
and can do terrible damage to our witness and ministry.**

The question is,

**what does it mean for Jesus to dwell in us and among us,
and for Christ truly to be the sovereign Lord of our lives?**

It means that we let God's grace draw us nearer and deeper,
and allow God's grace guide us in building up the body.

It is consciously and deliberately living a life
of faith that makes room for God's gracious love.

The Session and congregation at the Presbyterian church in NC
enthusiastically welcomed the Quaker family into our membership,
and I resisted my inclination to bring a squirt gun.

They were a joyful blessing and wonderful addition to our family.

**Our call is to accept and trust God and God's gracious purpose,
and that not by our own efforts, Christian service and works
are we trying to earn that which it delights the Lord to give...**

... which means trusting God to bring us where we really need to be,
by keeping my ego, my ways and my need to control
from distracting, hindering or interfering
with God's gracious love, will and purpose.

That same message flows all through the witness of Scripture,
about God's abiding love, like a light shining in the darkness,
which reaches out with hope for the unworthy and undeserving,

**and which frees us from the pressure of having to make the grade,
or of unending demands always for more performance & perfection...**

... **because God's promise, God's grace, love and hope
are freely given without any limits, demands or requirements
that we must first achieve and fulfill before God will act.**

When I finally come to my end, some things I will have gotten right
and other decisions in life, I will have gotten wrong ---
**-- but in either case,
it will be entirely the grace of God that brings me home.**

As those united into the one body by Christ's death and resurrection,
by that grace, we are called to live with our differences
for the sake of God's purpose and Christian community...
...because we are all God's children saved by God's grace alone.

Our call and challenge

is that as those whose lives have been touched & claimed by Jesus
now, we must be the affirming and inviting people of God
a touching and compassionate community of gracious hope,
**who are capable of faithfully reflecting the grace of God
as we learn to walk ever more faithfully with our Lord.**

So I may need to think and rethink about how I feel about God's grace,
especially toward those I perceive as unworthy or hopelessly lost.

Our mission is to be a people who show and speak grace into this world.

So maybe I need to relax more and simply enjoy the truth of God's love.
Our call is to serve with joy and fulfillment and pleasure,
& not to be so driven to impress or try to earn God's grace.

Our call is to celebrate with joy and delight and open fellowship
by offering our absolute best in response to God's grace,
and by taking more pleasure in joyfully serving the Lord.

**Our hope rests not in our religious achievements, works, or status,
but entirely upon the certainty of God's goodness & gracious love.**

As we read in John 3:16-17,

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not
perish, but has eternal life. **For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the
world!"**

Could the Lord have made it any more clear than that?!