
Reflection 1 Forgive and Build one another up

Romans 14: 1-13, 19: Just as in Ephesians 4, 4 Sundays ago, Paul here spells out what it should mean for the way that we live, 24/7, when we accept the truth / reality of what God has done for us in Christ and trust in the Grace, the loving forgiveness that He offers.

Is our faith “weak” or “strong”? Are we being “weak” in seeking comfort from sticking to our religious traditions and long-time observances or is our faith big and “strong” enough to cope with the challenge of new people, new ideas and our changing situations? Are there “strong” and “weak” in our Christian faith? Of course, but me or you should not judge the faith of others. And sometimes those who are strongest in Christ are most aware of their weakness.

Paul gave two examples of differing opinions: about food and about holy days. Back in the communities of assorted Christian believers in the city of Rome, there were two opposing approaches: the “strong”, who ate everything and the “weak”, who ate only vegetables. The “strong” would represent a majority of people who don’t care about eating any meat, even from animals sacrificed to Roman gods. The “weak” could represent Jews who had become Christians, who wanted to continue to eat kosher, but who couldn’t because of Roman policy and therefore ate only vegetables. These weak ones would probably also include newly converted Christians, who may have come from traditions that advocated vegetarianism. Paul presents the food choices in a stark way, between those on the one hand who would eat only vegetables and on the other hand, those who would eat anything: two extreme cases that should provoke the reader, because they are both caricatures. In fact, no one eats strictly only greenery and no one really eats everything. & concerning the religious calendar, a minority wanted to respect certain sacred days, while the majority is indifferent to this.

Paul wants to put all these people in agreement on one point. **It is essential for Christians that whatever we do, we do it for Christ, to whom we all belong.**

Paul instructs the Christians to bend over backwards not to offend or hurt their fellow believers over such sensibilities even if they don't really matter. But the point here was that Paul is very concerned about the unity of brothers and sisters in Christ. He wanted the motley assorted members of the communities to understand, respect and love each other, to have the same mind & attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:2, Romans 15:5), and to be united in Christ.

Whether it is styles of worship or political loyalties or how best to be good stewards of our gifts and of God's creation, Paul was not asking the Christians of Rome to all have the same opinion. He is asking them not to arrogantly condemn or despise each other about opinions — Differences over the centrality of Christ and the Cross, over the authority of the Bible and our dependence on Grace do matter and are different matters altogether. In a spirit of unity and understanding, this leaves much room for debate among Christians, and we should welcome this rather than worry about it.

“Let us then therefore make every effort to get along with each other & help build up each other with encouraging words; certainly don't drag them down by finding fault

Matthew 18:21-35:

To work for peace, unity and reconciliation is easier in principle than in practise where we can find it so hard to forgive and forget. So often, grudges and resentments are nursed to keep them warm and held on to so that like a tumour they grow and limit our lives. Not only the petty, but also the serious hurts that we choose to inflict on each other. We can choose to be so “right” that we are wrong, underlined by Jesus' comment in Mark 10:18, that “No one is good but God alone.”

A smug piety may become an excuse to look down on others and to limit our willingness to understand them, forgive them and, hardest of all, learn from them. If we seek a more faithful Christian way of life, faith and worship, then changing minds, including our own, will be more fruitful even than forgiving recurrent offences.

The “kingdom of heaven” (which we can read, for now, as the way things ought to be – and might well be – whenever/wherever God’s will is done) can only be described through a parable story, rather than the narrow-minded, number based rules that Peter was hoping Jesus would give him.

How often will we also fall into the trap that catches Peter? His negotiating position seemed, perhaps, quite generous: to forgive seven times. But if we’re counting, then have we forgiven even once completely, rather than merely postponed unforgiveness “*from our heart*”? ***This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother and sister from your heart.*** (35)

Forgiveness is only the first step towards being able to live as forgiving forgiven people, and to transform broken relationships rather than allowing things to stay as they are. In this story, Jesus teaches how by the grace of God, our life may be opened out rather than being closed down and written off. We are given permission, not to stop forgiving, but to be free to persevere – and it might be best for us to do so. We are accountable for our choices, but are given every opportunity, each day, to choose a better world for others and for ourselves. Where will you start?