

One in the Spirit

Romans 12:1-13

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I have a relative who is full of advice. I bet you have one, too. They are sure that there is one right way to understand every situation, and they have a lock on it, so no one else needs to go to the trouble of having an opinion. And never mind that their own family is a little bit of a mess, you know what I mean? It makes me a little tired, and I go out of my way not to let this relative know when we have a decision to make, because I don't want to hear it. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

I have to tell you, I often feel the same way about the Apostle Paul, and that is why I don't preach from his writings very often.

You probably remember that Paul traveled all over, from Jerusalem to Rome, preaching the gospel and establishing churches. He would stay with a new church for a couple of years and then go off to the next town to set up another church, and he would stay in touch with his former churches by letter. Often, those churches would start getting into trouble as soon as he left, and Paul would write back to straighten them out.

Now, the Christian faith was new to the world, and Christians hadn't had a lot of time to work out how to worship and live and work with one another, so it is not surprising that there was a lot to figure out about what it means to be redeemed by grace and equal in the eyes of God, no longer bound by the rules of this world, yet still living in it, where there were class distinctions and gender distinctions and slavery and every sort of temptation. Is this person who sits next to me my brother in Christ or my slave? If I was born a Jew, am I still to follow Torah? What about those Christians who were not born Jews? Do they have to follow Torah? What may we eat when we eat together? It was a LOT to figure out.

For example, the Corinthian church, like all churches at the time, met in someone's house. To have room for everyone to be present for worship and communion, they had to use the biggest house available, which means the home of the wealthiest member. This Corinthian host had taken to inviting all his wealthy friends over for dinner BEFORE everyone else showed up for worship. The rich people lay around eating a sumptuous meal. Everyone else had to hang around outside till they were finished, and THEN they got to come in for hymns and prayers and a morsel of bread and a sip of wine. Paul, exasperated, wrote, "Oh, for heaven's sake, cut it out!"

Paul also admonished women only to preach with their hair covered. He had to resolve a dispute between those who wanted to be able to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols and those who thought that this was sacrilegious. And, by the way, Paul thought everyone should just be celibate, since the Second Coming was coming soon and they just didn't have time to get involved in sex.

Like my nosy relative, Paul was full of advice, advice that probably made sense in its time and place. But much of it just isn't relevant to us today. So, when we have a decision to make, I usually wouldn't consult Paul.

But then, I come to today's scripture. Interestingly, it is written to the church in Rome, a church Paul did not establish, one he hadn't even visited yet. And so, this passage is not about some very specific mess that the church had gotten itself into. Instead, it is about what is needed for all of us, for any church in any time and any place, to live as the redeemed Body of Christ. It is about how we put the love of God into action. This passage is beautiful and dense and timeless. It makes me want to get to know Paul all over again. So read it beautifully a moment ago, but I want us to hear it again. Paul writes,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

That is a tall order, and we will all spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to it. But Paul says that when we give our lives over to God – “a living sacrifice,” he says – when we trust God, when we know that God is holding us in the palm of God’s hand, not just for now but for eternity, then that sacrifice, that knowledge, that trust transforms us. We will know what God wants us to do. We will be one in the Spirit, and we will live in love.

Today, after worship, we will meet as the Body of Christ, to consider changes to our Constitution and Bylaws. I worked with Pam Brown and Ann Koniszewski and Steve Dwyer over the past several months to create the first draft. Our goals were to just clean up some technical and organizational issues, to incorporate some changes that had already been voted by the membership but never published in an updated document, and maybe – just maybe – to reduce the number of elected leaders it takes to keep the church running. When we looked closely at our current bylaws, we found some things that surprised us, and so we dug deeper.

I can tell you that we worked many, many, many hours on this. We consulted other churches’ bylaws and whatever we could find on best practices in church governance. We talked with individual church leaders, past and present. We worked with open hearts and in good faith. When the first draft was finished, each Board had an opportunity to weigh in on their own section. Then we took it to the Church Cabinet and they made some modifications and sent it to all of you for a vote. So, it is in your hands.

I said a moment ago that my relative who is full of advice is just sure that there is exactly one right way to understand every situation, and they have a lock on it, so no one else needs to go to the trouble of having an opinion. But you know that is not the way it works. We each bring our own wisdom to this decision, and the right answer for this church, according to our Bylaws, is the one that two-thirds of us agree on. If what we decide works well for us, hallelujah! If it doesn’t work as well as we would hope, then we can try again in the future.

So, we will approach this decision as Paul advises – as the redeemed children of God, who trust in God, who know that God is holding each of us and holding this church in the palm of God’s hand. We will offer one another genuine love, honoring one another as equals, and cherishing the gifts that God has given to each of us.

We, who are many, are one body in Christ, Paul says, and individually we are members one of another. Isn’t that a beautiful image? My ability to succeed in ministry depends entirely on each of you. And the Sunday School depends not only on the good work of the teachers and children but also on the prayers of each of us. Our worship is enhanced by the good work of the deacons and the ushers and the choir, roles we all can fill from time to time. Our missions rely not only on our giving of time and treasure, but also on the good work of the Trustees to keep the building up and running so that the Soup Kitchen can operate and community groups can meet here. We depend on one another. We need one another. We can only be the Body of Christ if we are together. We are One in the Spirit. We are One in the Lord. And they will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen