

“All Stand”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 13, 2020

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 103:8-13

Rev. John Wahl

Romans 14:1-12

When we began our look at this letter three weeks ago, the Apostle Paul introduced this section of Romans saying, “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” (12:1) Here, in this passage, Paul instructs the Roman church to offer their lives to God through Christ, not by judging one another’s actions and practices. They were not to spend their time judging themselves as righteous in faith and others’ as below the mark. They are not supposed to convince someone out of their position before they could be part of the fellowship. Everyone should remember how God has accepted and forgiven the other.

In some of his earlier letters, the Apostle Paul comes across as contentious, opinionated: seemingly a stickler for rules. Now, Paul offers advice that people should welcome one another and not judge different convictions. Good advice, we may think; but the issues he mentions – what food to eat and which days to set aside as festivals – seem so much smaller than the issues we struggle with: who should be welcomed at the communion table, how we define ethical and moral sexual relationships, whether the wars we are fighting are just, and what the arrival of new immigrants means for our communities, churches and nation.

At its core, the issue here is one group setting itself over and above another; claiming the moral high ground for its particular practices and opinions. When we judge others, we place our authority above God’s. We are all servants in God’s household. Thus, we are to focus on God; not on our supposed superiority to others. All conduct must take its reference from our service to Jesus whose claim to lordship over all comes from his death and resurrection. We need not justify to God the conduct of others, but only our own. Paul asks, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” (14:10)

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sounds a similar warning: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye when you have a log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You

hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Mt. 7:1-5).

The judgment forbidden in Romans 14 and Matthew 7 is the contemptuous dismissal of those who do not believe like us, or live like us, or vote like us. They are fools, we think, and we see no contradiction between our being Christian and our despising of them: be it for whether or not they stand or kneel, what profession or hobby they choose to pursue, when or where they choose to worship, or what gender identification they claim. This is a call to do more than just tolerate, but to offer welcome, give respect and show love.¹

The following story about judging and not judging comes from the tradition of the rabbis. It was shared on the occasion of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, which is also called *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment: a day of reflection and introspection. It is called "The Rabbi's Gift."

The story is told of a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once it was a great order, but as a result of the waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeen and eighteen centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteen, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the woods surrounding the monastery there was a little cabin that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a retreat. The old monks could always sense when the rabbi was visiting the cabin. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and ask for any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of this visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "Yes. I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. When the time came for the abbot to leave, they embraced one another. "It has been a wonderful thing that we have talked after all these years," the abbot said. "But is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded, "I have no advice to give you." But then the rabbi paused and said quietly to the abbot, "But, there is one thing I have to tell you: One of you is the Messiah."

¹ Israel Kamadzundu from *WorkingPreacher.com*

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—he said that one of us was the Messiah! Maybe it's something from Jewish mysticism. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks began to think about this and wondered whether the rabbi's words could actually be true? The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, who is it? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant that Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Jonathan! Jonathan gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Jonathan is virtually always right, often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Jonathan, but surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then almost mysteriously he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Could Philip be the Messiah? Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? Oh God, me?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might actually be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, it so happened that people occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. And as they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. And it happened that within a few years the monastery

*had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirit.*²

The rabbis draw this conclusion from the story: how we judge and treat the people that are around us, on a simple day-to-day level, not only determines our relationship with them but the very quality of life in our community. Whether that community is an apartment building, the floor of a dorm, a neighborhood street, or volunteer organization, our worlds can be transformed when we look at another human being and see their worth. According to the rabbinic tradition, how we judge other people is one of the definitions of wisdom: Who is the person who is wise? The one who has the ability to learn something from every person. A wise person is able to hear and appreciate that every individual can make a valuable contribution to our life and community.

We could view today's passage as the "The Rabbi (Paul's) Gift" – the gift of respect for others in the context of service to the One who is Lord of the dead and the living; the one before whom we will all stand one day, accountable for our own actions and inactions.

Our unity in the church is found not in particular practices of piety, but in the fact that we belong to the Lord. God has welcomed each of us, Paul says; so, too, we should welcome those whose practices of piety differ from our own.³ When the church fails to be a sacred place for unity and the appreciation of diversity, the entire world suffers; when we practice welcome and hospitality, acceptance and understanding; when we build one another up rather than tearing each other down, the world becomes a more vibrant center of light and spirit. What a gift, indeed? All thanks and praise to God. Amen.

² As quoted by Alyce McKenzie, "You Be the Judge (Not!)" from *Patheos.com*

³ Audrey West from *WorkingPreacher.com*