

Romans 14:1-13 “More Grace; Less Judgment”

Once upon a time I had a job working as a courier in Charlotte. Most days I would have a lull in my work about three or four o'clock so I would slide on into Bojangles there on the corner of Charlottetown Ave. and Third Street. I would get a regular drink and either read my Bible or doodle while talking to the UPS drivers who would stop for lunch about that time. There was this homeless guy who called himself Chilly Willy. He would beg for money outside of Bojangles. Sometimes a Good Samaritan would buy him a biscuit or a cup of coffee and Chilly would come inside to take as long as he could to drink it so he could stay out of the cold. One day I came into Bojangles and there was this guy who was trying to “help” Chilly Willy by telling him to clean himself up, to get a job, and to get off the streets. It certainly didn't look like this guy was helping Chilly Willy. To be honest it looked more like this guy was trying to make himself feel better at Chilly Willy's expense. That's what this morning's passage is about. Paul is strongly encouraging the church in Rome to love their neighbors as themselves. That means we cannot judge other people unless we are worthy to stand before the throne of God. We are not worthy to stand before God's throne. None of us are good enough to even look at the throne of God. We never will be. So who are we to judge others if we are all sinners in need of grace? What we are called to do is offer more grace and less judgment.

Last week we talked about how in the church at Rome there were a lot of different ideas about who God is, and what it means to live a life devoted to God. Trying to understand the nature of God and what God asks of us is what we call theology. In the church in Rome there were a lot of different theologies coming together and trying to sort themselves out. The Romans were pagans. They had a whole bunch of different “g” gods. Depending on a person's family or what a person wanted they would have to live a certain way, or present an offering to various different Gods. For a good harvest you might leave an offering at the temple of Demeter. If you wanted to win a battle you would leave an offering at the temple of Mars. It could be pretty confusing. Some these pagan Romans had started to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Now they had to figure out what it means to live life serving the one God instead of many?

The Jews who had begun following the way of Jesus Christ naturally believed, that since Jesus is a Jewish rabbi these new Roman converts were converting to Judaism. If a person is going to convert to Judaism the males must be circumcised. These converts must stop eating food offered to idols, and they must start trying to follow all 644 commandments of the Law of Moses! **(pause)** Wow! Talk about a reason to turn around and walk out the door. The message was basically, “If you want to be a Christian you have to follow all of the rules of being a Jew first. And it is the Jews job to make sure you keep to the Law of Moses.” Let's just call it like it was, there was a lot of judgment in that idea. There was a lot of judgment in the church at Rome in that time, and there is a lot of judgment in the life of the church today.

By a show of hands how many of y'all have heard children on a playground say, “If you don't play the game my way I am going to take my ball and go home!” **(pause)** How many of y'all have heard people in churches say, “If you don't do things my way I am going to take my tithe and leave”? **(pause)** If you don't worship my way I am going to leave. If you have Communion too often I am going to leave. If the children do not sit there and be quiet during worship I am going to leave. If the preacher does not wear a white shirt and black tie under his robe I am going to leave. **(pause)** Do any of those sound dumb to you? **(pause)** Guess what? I have heard every one of them from “members” of churches I have served. Judgment in churches is a real problem. Judgment is turning people away from the Church. Judgment is turning people away from Christ.

Here's a good question. Did you know that every one of the letters found in the New Testament is written to address a particular problem in a particular church, or churches? At a day and time before e-mail, or cell phones, or even telephones, letter writing was one of the ways the church got things done. One of the ways

the church handled its business. In this portion of Paul's letter to the Romans Paul is addressing judgment. There was too much judgment in the church at Rome. There was so much judgment in the church at Rome somebody took the time to go out and buy expensive paper and ink, and then wrote a letter to Paul. Post office? There was no post office. Somebody had to track Paul down and take the letter to Paul. This morning's passage is a part of Paul's response.

For the last two weeks and in the two passages which come before this one Paul talks about what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul explains how all of the Law of Moses and the writings are summed up in, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:9). In this passage Paul seems to be saying quit getting in the way of the Gospel! The Gospel does not need your neck tie, or your dress, or my alb. When we become more focused on what we think it means to be the church or to be a Christian we put a stumbling block before others. We prevent others from coming to Christ. Isn't putting a stumbling block before others the opposite of the great commission. It's like we are saying, "Yes, Go make disciples, but when they come in here the men had better wear a suit and tie, and the women had better wear a nice dress and shoes that match. While you're at it make sure they are white, upper middle class and are prepared to bring their tax return so we can tell them how much to tithe." (pause) Who are we to pass judgment on another? (pause) Christ alone is worthy to pass judgment, and He will. Judgment is not our job. Our job is to go fishing.

When Jesus begins His ministry Jesus passes by the Sea of Galilee where naturally there are men cleaning their nets from fishing the night before. Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, "**Follow me and I will make you fishers of men**" (Matt 4:19). (pause) Here's the funny thing about fishermen. Fishermen do not change fish into something else. A fisherman cannot turn a fish into a chair, or a house. A fisherman catches fish. As the church it is our job to be fishers of people. We are to be fishers of all kinds of people. It should not matter if they are rich or poor; dirty or clean; red, yellow, black, or white. I seem to recall they are *all* precious in God's sight. (pause) Oops. We judged them for not being more like us. We keep throwing them out of the boat. Jesus loves them *all*. Jesus loves *all* of us. Jesus died for *all* of us. Oops. How do we get this right?

We should probably begin by recognizing what Jesus said about who is to be saved. Nicodemus asked this question in John 3. Jesus told Nicodemus, "**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life**" (John 3:16). When John Wesley was asked the same question Brother Wesley put it this way. "that God is; that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him;" and that he is to be sought by glorifying him as God, by giving him thanks for all things, and by a careful practice of moral virtue, of justice, mercy, and truth, toward their fellow creatures."¹

Sisters and brothers our job is to go out and catch the fish. It is not our job to judge them in Bojangles for not being like us. It is not our job to save them. Jesus Christ has already died to save them as Jesus died to save us. What they must do is believe in God. If they are willing to believe in God, God's grace will come upon them. They will be saved. Then they begin the journey of seeking God. The more diligently they seek God the more they will glorify God. Our job then becomes the same as theirs. We are to walk the journey toward God together. We are to walk side by side. Certainly, we are to share what we have learned from our mistakes. However, none of us is better than another. We share in God's grace as we learn to stretch and grow toward God. For this reason, our church needs to be filled with more grace and less judgment.

In Jesus' Name - Amen

¹ John Wesley, "Salvation by Faith" <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-1-salvation-by-faith/> (last viewed 9-17-17).