

“A Slice of Romans, Part VI, Communion”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 1st 2017 (World Communion Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Romans 14

Food was a big deal...a big deal in the early church. Then again: the fact that our worship, this morning, will conclude with the sharing of the gifts of food piled high on this table may well be an indication of the fact that food is a pretty big deal with us, as well. And yes: the fact that we use leavened bread—whereas other Christians use unleavened for this feast—and the fact that we use a non-alcoholic beverage whereas other Christians use wine, is also an indication of the fact that food can prove to be not only a big deal but even a source of controversy for us. Nevertheless: issues around food do not occupy the same place of controversy in our Christian world, as those issues did in the ancient world of first century Christianity. Nor should that come as a surprise.

After all: Christianity was born in a cradle that was thoroughly stamped by the beliefs and practices of the Jewish people, for whom to this day, questions around food play a big role. Some foods are kosher; others are not. One of the clear lines of demarcation that divides the Jewish world from the Gentile world, is the line that requires observant Jews to say no to a variety of foods that others consume without so much as a moment's thought. Then again: much the same can be said of faithful Muslims, Hindus and many others: Christianity is actually something of an exception when it comes to the whole question of permitted and prohibited foods. But we Christians did not reach that conclusion easily; we did not arrive there without a fair degree of conflict. On the contrary: given that this religion—coming of age within the context of ancient Judaism—quickly became a predominantly Gentile affair, pretty much guaranteed that food questions would have to be resolved one way or the other.

Much the same can be said of the observance of distinctively Jewish holy days. As some of you may be aware, the Jewish High Holy Days concluded just yesterday, with the solemn observance of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Once again, it was only natural that the first century Christians coming from a Jewish background would continue to observe these occasions...and that they might regard these occasions as incumbent upon even those Gentiles who had joined the Christian movement. None of these issues were easily resolved, which is why we find Paul addressing them here in Romans as well as in his 1st letter to the Corinthians. And its why we find Jesus addressing particularly the food question in parts of the Gospel narratives, eventually insisting that nothing we put into ourselves can render us unclean...only those things that come from us—lying, cheating, anger, resentment—can truly defile a human being. Meaning that it was only a matter of time before the Christian movement—both in terms of the foods it would permit, and the holy days it would observe—headed in a very different direction from what came to be known as Rabbinic Judaism. So far, so good. But it's Paul's particular angle on these questions...his particular take, not so much on

the controversies themselves, but on the implications of these controversies: that is what is of special interest this morning. Because there is a sense...a sense in which Paul has a word of caution for those on both sides of these disputes.

Fair to suggest, I think, that Paul begins by addressing those who want to continue to observe the kind of food regulations and holy day observances that would have been standard fare for those members of the Roman Church who came from a Jewish background. With those folks, Paul pretty much sticks to his guns: insisting that they ought not to be judging those who do not follow those food laws or the observance of special days. And yes, if they were reading carefully, they'll also know that Paul subtly insults them by describing them as the ones who are "weak" in their faith: in other words, their trust of God is limited, requiring them to believe that they will fall out of favour with God if they stop their food observances and discontinue their traditional liturgical practices. Clearly...unambiguously...Paul (despite the fact that he, himself, was not only a Jew but originally part of the highly traditionalistic Pharisaic Party)...Paul nevertheless was in clear sympathy with those whom he refers to as the "strong" in faith: in other words, those who saw no need to follow kosher laws or observe the Jewish sacred days. And so he warns the weak in faith that they ought not to regard themselves as better than the strong ones, simply because they keep kosher and observe the Jewish festivals. But then...

...well, then, Paul does something utterly delightful. He turns this thing on its head, and says to the "strong" ones: okay. "You know and I know that it doesn't matter if you eat pork. You know and I know that God has far more important things to worry about than a slice of bacon. But if, by choosing to eat that slice of bacon at a public function with other Christians, you destabilize the faith of a sister or brother—a beloved fellow disciple for whom Christ lived and for whom Christ died—why do you think God would approve of that? And similarly: if you are going to flaunt the fact that you are choosing to not observe an occasion that your sister and brother holds as sacred, what do you think you are accomplishing by undermining the faith of a fellow Christian whose faith is already weaker than yours since they think that it is incumbent upon them to follow those practices? Why would you do that to one another? Why would you harm your fellow Christian in so grievous a way?" Those are pretty good questions, aren't they? And they are certainly questions that are as alive for us right now, as they were 2000 years ago.

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If I were to try to articulate, in one sentence, the principle I sense at work in this portion of the letter to the Romans, I would put it like this: "When we choose to fight about inessentials, rather than place our Christian union, our communion, as the highest goal, we betray the cause of Christ." And it is, I fear, too easy for us to treat this as a "ho-hum" matter. After all: living 20 centuries after the fact, we know in our bones that Paul won this argument concerning food and concerning other Jewish particulars. And so we instinctively think: "Yeah, of course getting along with one another is far more important than arguing about food!" But you need to remember, from a Biblical

perspective—from the perspective of the only scriptures Paul possessed, namely the Old Testament—those who were arguing for the non-negotiable nature of those food laws and other Jewish practices, were standing on far more solid ground. They had the better argument here; Paul was the maverick. So we shouldn't be too quick to presume that the issues **we** think are worthy of fighting about, are any more worthy than the issues that those first century Christians thought were the be all and the end all. No. We need to take Paul at his word when he tells them—and through them—tells us that the establishment of Christian community, much of the time, ought to trump our need to be right about those issues that divide us within whatever Christian community we have found ourselves. And obviously...

...obviously there will be limits beyond which we will have to say “thanks but no thanks” to that principle. If someone wished to form a Neo-nazi study-and-action league, or a branch of the Ku Klux Klan here at the Nanaimo Ecumenical Centre, I hope a few of us would recognize that our desire for unity, our desire for communion, had bumped up against a place at which we would have no choice but to say “hell no”! There are times...there are times when we have no choice but to make a principled stand, even if that threatens division within the body of Christ. And yet, when we honestly look at the history of the Church....and yes...

...especially when we look at the 500 year history of Protestantism, surely there are times when it is impossible for us not to shake our heads and marvel at the trivial nature of the issues that have caused Christians to separate one from the other. At such times I suspect the Apostle Paul looks on and shakes his head in bewilderment. Worse still, at such times, I hunch that God shakes His head in bewilderment.

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Permit me two further observations.

The first of those observations involves this place, this Nanaimo Ecumenical Centre. Given that the Centre has been around for nearly 40 years, and that my time here comprises less than five of those years, I trust that no one will accuse me of boasting when I make the point that the very existence of this Centre is something for which we can all be grateful. That the nearly 40 year history of Trinity United Church within the Ecumenical Centre, has included many times of turbulence—including some times when the congregation wondered whether this really was the right home for its ongoing life—none of that ought that be permitted to diminish the achievement of a Catholic parish and a Protestant congregation sharing life-together in the way that TU and TC share life together here. On the contrary: whenever outside people meet me and ask me where I serve, and I explain that I serve a United Church congregation that shares a home with a Catholic congregation, they first express surprise and then express delight. Make no mistake about it. The life and witness of these two congregations in this place, make for a wonderful sermon illustration of the point Paul is trying to make in this morning's text, namely that Christian communion...Christian

community ought not to be lightly sacrificed on the altar of theological disagreement. That's my first bonus observation. Here's the other one.

Recall...recall that with this morning's reading, we bring to a close our look at that slice of Romans which Paul begins by appealing to his readers to offer themselves as a living sacrifice to their God, and immediately assures them that the process of making that offering will lead them into non-conformity with the ways of the world. I want to argue that nowhere is that truer than here, where we are being counselled that concord—community, communion—is generally more important than being right. And I hunch...I hunch that one of the reasons even non-Church people are impressed when they hear about a Catholic Church and a Protestant congregation living together harmoniously...

...I suspect that even secular folk are impressed with that because they know full well that the way of the world is one in which each and every disagreement is permitted to take on monstrous proportions. A recent issue of the New York Times sported a piece by writer Bret Stephens' in which he bemoans what he calls "the dying art of disagreement", meaning the fraying of our ability to disagree with one another without doing so with acrimony and contempt. While I would not presume to have any easy answers with which to fix that societal ailment—neither does Bret Stephens claim to have the answers!—what I will insist...

...and in this I believe that I am in good company, making a point that Paul himself would wish to make...

...I will insist that the most important social witness of the Church is not to fix society, but to model what an alternative society might look like, gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. And I will insist—in much the same way—that the most important political witness of the Church is not to fix the politics of the wider world, but to demonstrate an alternative polity in which genuine community can be found, and genuine communion is generously offered to all who hunger and all who thirst.

Communion. Communion with one another. Communion: communion between us and this world of wonder we are privileged together to share. Above all: communion: communion grounded in the life of the One who lived, who died, but who lives again, that we might all have life and have it in abundance.

May his generous love guide and govern us this day...and always. In Jesus' name. Amen!