

INI

Romans 14,15-23

Trinity 18 — 4 October 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, which was read earlier:

for the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: When we eat we usually follow rules of etiquette. We pray before the meal. We ask for something to be passed to us and then say "please" and "thank you" – instead of grabbing it. If we use a knife, we place it on our plate instead of putting it back on the table. We eat desert last instead of first – in spite of the humorous saying, "Life is short' eat desert first." We wait until everyone is seated before starting to eat. If we are at a restaurant or a banquet there are more rules to be followed; for example, which utensil to use with which course.

We learn all of these rules in childhood. As we grow up they become second nature so that we do not have to think about them before putting them in practice. But if someone forgets a rule we do not tell that person that he or she is not a Christian. If someone uses a salad fork for eating meat we do not say, "Christians do not use salad forks for eating meat. Since you are using a salad fork for eating meat you must not be a Christian." If someone said that, we would think he or she needs to have his or her medication adjusted.

We may laugh at such a situation, but it was that kind of situation that confronted Paul as he wrote to the early Christians in Rome.

In the Old Testament, God told His people what kinds of food they could and could not eat. In part, those rules were there to mark God's people as separate from all the other peoples of the world. It was part of God's Law. If people broke the rules it was more than a breach of etiquette — it was sin!

When Jesus came He fulfilled all of the Old Testament Law, as Paul puts it:

For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes.
(Romans 10,4)

Some new Christians, however, still had trouble believing that because of Jesus everything was now lawful to eat.

Strong Christians in Rome seemed to want to use their strength to lord it over weak Christians.

Weak Christians seemed to want to use their weakness to limit the Christian freedom of strong Christians.

It was an ugly situation.

How could they resolve this situation?

Are there limits to Christian freedom?

Does Paul's solution still speak to us today?

This brings me to today's sermon theme: "**The Christian's Freedom To Serve.**" I'll develop this theme in three points:

- 1) Selfish Serving;**
- 2) Christ First Served Us;** and,
- 3) Serving Christ Is Serving Others**

1) Selfish Serving. God told His Old Testament people not to eat such animals as pigs. Could a Christian eat pork, such as bacon or pork chops, and not sin?

In the book of Genesis, it seems that before the Fall Adam and Eve were vegetarians. Should Christians be vegetarians?

Some Christians drank wine and some did not. Can Christians drink wine?

Can Christians worship on a day other than Saturday, which was the Jewish Sabbath. If you did not worship on Saturday, were you still a Christian?

These were the questions which were dividing the Christian congregations in Rome. These questions mainly divided Jewish Christians from non-Jewish Christians.

On some things the Old Testament was silent. For example, there is no demand to be a vegetarian, that is, to abstain from eating meat. While drunkenness is clearly prohibited, there is no demand to abstain from wine.

On two points, however, the Old Testament was quite clear.

Eating certain foods was prohibited, such as pork. There were no exceptions to this rule. Also, animal meat had to be killed in a certain way or it was unclean.

The Ten Commandments contain the Third Commandment, “Thou shalt remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Again, no exceptions. And for the Jews the Sabbath day was Friday night and all day Saturday. One worshiped not only by hearing God’s Word, but also by abstaining from all work.

The controversy then is between those who consider themselves to be “strong Christians” — by the way, Paul considers himself to be a “strong Christian” — and so-called weak Christians. Each group wants to have their own way.

The strong want to ignore the scruples of the weak and tell them that in Christ they have the freedom to eat whatever they want, drink what they want, and worship how and when they please. They seem to be quite prepared to rub the noses of the weak in their strength so that it is a real possibility that the weak will fall from the faith.

The weak, on the other hand, want to bind the strong to their thinking. They want to force them to give up their freedom in Christ and go along with restrictions on diet, drink, and worship.

This is like two groups of children fighting over a toy. Each screams: “Mine!” and refuses to share or compromise. Each says to the other: “I’m right and you’re wrong!”

In effect, each group is selfish and rooted in its own selfishness. Each is serving itself rather than the other. Each is feeding the appetites of selfishness. My friends, this is sin. But sin blinds itself to its own sinfulness, its own selfishness. It reduces God’s Kingdom to questions of meat and drink, of serving your own belly.

Paul, however, says that God’s Kingdom is not a question of feeding your own face, but rather “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” This “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” is first to be seen in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, because:

2) Christ First Served Us. Righteousness, peace and joy are not disembodied Christian virtues. They are not to be practised like table manners are learned so that we are “nicer and more polite people.” Rather they are directly related to what Jesus has done for us.

Righteousness is being able to stand before God. It is being able to come to Him and pray, “Our Father,” and be certain that He will hear us as an earthly father hears his earthly children.

Peace means being able to be at peace with God. It means knowing that God is not angry with us, but has our best interests at heart. It means knowing

that instead of condemning us, God forgives us and welcomes us into His presence.

Joy is not an emotional feeling, but a confident and unwavering expectation that in good times and bad God is with us. It is a confidence that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ. It is a confidence that at the end of our earthly lives God has prepared much more wonderful and almost indescribable things for us — to live with Him forever.

But righteousness, peace, and joy are ours because of what Jesus has done for us. By ourselves, we know that we do not deserve to stand before God because all of us have “sinned and fall short of God's glory” (Romans 3,23). But it is even worse than this. As Paul says: “there is none righteous, not even one” (Romans 3,10; Psalm 14,1).

Peace with God cannot be achieved by us because “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God ... and cannot please God” (Romans 8,7-8). Hostility on account of sin speaks about strife rather than peace.

If we look within ourselves we see that our emotions go up and down, confident one moment and wavering or doubting the next. The joys we experience can quickly turn to tears.

Jesus has won our righteousness for us. He did it by going to the Cross and taking our sins, our hostilities, and doubting and wavering into the grave and then rising on the third day to wipe the slate of sin clean. He did it for us and the world. God demonstrated His righteousness by displaying His Son on the Cross as the payment for sin (Romans 3,25). We have peace with God because

while we were enemies [of God], we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son. (Romans 5,10).

Reconciliation means that those who were once enemies are now at peace. This peace is permanent because it depends on He Who is unchangeable — Jesus, Who died once for all.

When Jesus spoke to His disciples He said He was the Vine and we the branches. He gave us His Word so we might follow that Word and bear fruit. He said:

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is My commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you. (John 15,11-12)

Jesus' joy was the forgiveness that He won for us by going to the Cross (Hebrews 12,2). He endured the Cross to win heaven for us. The love He showed to us by dying and rising from the dead gives us our joy.

“Righteousness, peace, and joy” are complete in Jesus, and given to us through the Holy Spirit, Who has brought us to believe that Jesus died and rose for us. Through Jesus' Word, through Holy Baptism and Communion, the Spirit gives and assures us that forgiveness is ours.

This forgiveness brings us into God's Kingdom, the Kingdom of Jesus, which is secure in the heavens and made real in this life where God's Word is faithfully proclaimed and the Sacraments properly administered. We are empowered by Jesus' forgiving love because:

3) Serving Christ Is Serving Others. Paul says of Jesus:

For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet he lives because of the power of God. (2 Corinthians 13,4)

In the weakness of mortal flesh Jesus died on the Cross.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8,9).

It is only at the Cross, where Jesus reconciled both poor and rich, strong and weak, that differences over such things as food, drink, and worship can be reconciled. It is in the Cross that the strong are to realize that before God they are

weak; they too need forgiveness and need to repent of their belly service attitude. It is only in repentance that the weak can be freed of their belly serving attitude and become strong, strong not in themselves but in Christ.

On the whole notion of Christian liberty Luther wrote the following:

- 1) A Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to none.
- 2) A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. (Luther, “The Freedom of A Christian,” in *Three Treatises*, Fortress Press [1970], 277)

In Rome, both the strong and the weak seemed to think that they were free and subject to none, but neither wanted to think that they were servants, servants first of Christ and secondly servants of one another. Paul, however, contends for the strong to be strong and the weak to be weak, but not to oppress one another in either their strength or weakness. Neither side is to pass judgement against the other (Romans 14,4.10).

Both sides are to stand under the Cross of Christ, where both have the same forgiveness and both are served by the same Lord, Jesus. In this way they are to build one another up by pursuing the peace which Jesus has won for them.

How often in the church have there been divisions over what hymnal to use, when to worship, whether it is proper to drink a glass of wine, whether to have a church bazaar, whether it is proper to play cards? And so forth. How often has one side tried to lord it over the other? How often has it happened that one side tries to use the doctrine of offense as a club to beat the other into submission? When, in fact, the offense is not a question of faith but a difference of opinion. How often does it happen that instead of being built up in the faith both sides try to tear each other down? If these things happen, who wins? The devil, the world, and our flesh win because we have reduced God’s Kingdom to eating and drinking and serving our bellies.

Can some of these matters be matters of doctrine where no compromise should be tolerated because to do so would undermine the salvation Christ has won for us? It is possible, but it does not happen too often.

Paul asks the Romans and us to find reconciliation with one another under the Cross. It is only here that we can have reconciliation without bitterness, or the resentment that lingers as one side it is giving up something to the other side. Only under the Cross do we have righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, which first have been won for us by Jesus and are to be shared with one another.

Conclusion. In these areas of eating, drinking, and worship we clearly see that the Kingdom of God is not served if we serve ourselves and our bellies first. If that is our attitude, then the devil wins the day.

God's Kingdom, however, is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are not virtues like table manners to be learned. Rather these are gifts to us from Jesus. These gifts cannot be earned but are just that, gifts. They can only be strengthened as we gather around Word and Sacrament to humbly receive forgiveness for Jesus' sake. In Jesus, the strong are weak and the weak are strong, but not for themselves, but only to serve one another as Jesus first served us. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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