

No One Is an Island

sermon digest

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Romans 14:1-12; 15:5-7

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For some thirty years, Ed Perry was pastor of the prestigious Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Ed told about officiating in Louisville's first Catholic-Baptist wedding in the 1960's in one of the older Catholic Churches of the city, alongside a Catholic priest he had come to know through numerous ecumenical meetings and social events. After the wedding, the reception in the social hall of the Catholic Church began with champaign and toasts, which would not have been allowed in the Baptist church. During the festivities, the priest approached the Perrys, standing at the side sipping their non-alcoholic punch. Deciding to have a little fun with his teetotaling Baptist colleague, the priest raised his glass of champaign as if to offer a toast, and said, "Too bad, Ed my friend, that you cannot enjoy some of the finer things in life." Ed paused in search of an appropriate response then turned toward June and said, "John, have you had the pleasure of meeting my wife?"

For a few awkward moments, Baptist prohibition and Catholic celibacy collided without conflict, but also without concession or compromise.

I wonder if this Baptist-Catholic encounter of four decades ago might be the mirror image of Paul's attempt to sort out the differences in the church at Rome. Paul's Roman Epistle was apparently written to a predominantly Jewish-Christian community in the Imperial City of Rome. Like many large cities today, Rome had gathered residents from all parts of the Empire. The diversity of cultures was especially noticeable in public gatherings. The church in Rome was a reflection of the city's cultural diversity.

Religion is rooted in culture. Regardless of adaptations and changes over time, every world religion can be traced to a particular place, nationality, race, language, people, culture. Thus, Judaism is associated with the Mideastern culture of Israel, communicated through the Hebrew language, the official language of the modern State of Israel. Rooted in Judaism, Christianity emerged from Jesus of Nazareth whose birth is associated with the Western, global calendar. In spite of Jewish beginnings, Christian scriptures were handed down in Koine Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire. Although claiming a point of origin with Abraham, Islam has Arabic roots associated with Muhammad, born about 570 in the city of Mecca. The Koran is written in Arabic, the only language, according to Islam, in which the message is authentic. Although religions tend to make exclusive truth claims, they are all fallible human ways of acknowledging God.

In spite of the human flavor, I believe that all religions, regardless of their weird practices or beliefs, are responses to the reality of God. The very fact that humans tend to be religious creatures is evidence—not proof but evidence—of a transcendent reality we call "God." That does not imply that all religions are equal or that we should not distinguish between destructive and constructive religious beliefs and practices. We have a God-given intelligence to make value judgments not only between religions but within our own religious faith. Humans not only invent religion, they discern the good, mediocre, and evil that grows out of religious practices. We are constantly confronted with the need to sort out the good, bad, and ugly in every human institution. Discernment is a necessary part of life that is involved in a positive evolutionary development.

I was a seminary student in Fort Worth, Texas, in the early 1960's when the editor of my denominational state news magazine went on the warpath against seminary professors. He was angry that students were being taught to exercise judgment, the historical-critical method, in the interpretation of the Bible. He leaped on the word *critical* and declared that we have no right to "criticize" the Bible. To be fair, I am sure that he thought he was defending the Bible. But, in fact, he was defending his traditional understanding of the Bible against any discernment or change. Carried to a logical conclusion, some people were still defending the biblical authority for slavery based on the natural subservience assigned to people of color.

As we distinguish good from bad religion, we also need to distinguish essential from petty issues. As a whole, Paul's Epistle to Romans was anything but uncritical of the gross inhumanity of Roman culture or of exclusive practices of Jewish religion; but he also saw the destructive power of pettiness in the church. Some differences in faith and practice just do not matter. The attempt to create and enforce uniformity is not worth the damage it does to the community.

Under Paul, Christianity was striving to become a universal religion without cultural or national boundaries. The expansion of the church into gentile territory brought together people with a vast variety of religious backgrounds and cultural mores. The growing diversity of the church cut across expectations that all Christians should be exactly alike. Different ways of Christian worship and practice were creating tensions and threatening the *koinonia*, the community of church. So Paul appealed for an attitude of *welcome* between vegetarians and carnivores, Jewish Kosher and gentile consumers of pagan meat offerings, Sabbatarians and Sunday worshipers, Jewish and gentile holy days. Paul gently reminded Roman Christians they have no right to condemn anyone whom God has accepted into the family of faith. Another Christian's acts of faith rest on his or her intention to honor God, not on someone else's understanding or acceptance. The final arbiter of Christian practice is the judgment of God, not our judgment on one another. Christian eschatology clearly assigned the final Judgment to the end of history; it was not a proxy task assigned to interim authorities like church judiciaries, hierarchies, or denominations. A confession of ignorance about final judgment was necessary to maintain community in the church. One of the strong traditions that came out of the teachings of Jesus was the advice to disciples, (Mt. 7:1) "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."

The great nineteenth century missions movement was directly linked to the vision of the Baptist cobbler William Carey. More than eighteen centuries after the Great Commission, Christians were beginning to awaken to the calling of God to go into the world. Ironically the age of global missions came on the heels of British colonialism. Missionaries often came behind invading armies, and, especially in the awakening years, missionaries were prone to confuse Christ with Western culture. It took awhile to realize that the Christian gospel is citizen of no country and certainly no culture. Replacing African drums with pipe organs has nothing to do with the gospel of Christ. We have to learn to distinguish Christ from the cultural wrappings. We have to distinguish matters that are central to the Christian faith from issues of little or no consequence.

My Baptist denomination was in control of government and school in my hometown. I recall the resentment of some Protestant kids in school when we were stuck with eating fish sticks in the school cafeteria every Friday. I later decided that it must have been a federal mandate for the national lunch program. The standard Catholic fast on Friday certainly would not have been a matter of concern for our school authorities. But fish Fridays were a means of being faithful for the few Catholic kids in school. For the rest of us, fish might have been a minor inconvenience, but it did not cause any damage to our well-being or our faith.

That is the way Paul viewed some of the conflicts in the Roman church. He called the diet-conscious Christians "weak" and clearly identified himself with the view that eating Kosher was unnecessary, but he would not condemn the practice of fellow Christians adopted in good faith commitment to God.

In St. Louis, I was an occasional guest on a local TV talk show with a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi. I recall one session when the topic of religious identity came up. The young Conservative rabbi acknowledged his practice of eating Kosher, but not out of any religious necessity. He did not believe that he would invoke the wrath of God by eating a ham sandwich. But he noted that in travel abroad he had found his Jewish diet helped him to maintain his identity with his people and his religion. It was important to him whether or not I could agree with or understand the practice. This seems to meet the principle set forth by Paul. Observance in honor of the Lord is what matters, and the rest of us are not obligated either to imitate or to understand.

The love of God revealed in Christ is at the core of our faith. In Paul's Corinthian trilogy, the essence of our religion is "faith, hope, and love." We would agree that the greatest of these is *agape* love, unconditional affirmation of the worth of others modeled on the love of God we meet in Christ.

Through the Christian centuries, Christians have brutalized one another to the point of condemnation to hell and finding the most cruel and inhumane ways to execute people labeled as heretics or schismatics. We have fought wars and acted out hostility in institutional divorce over questions that in retrospect seem terribly insignificant. For example, one of the major factors in the division of Eastern and Western Christianity was over a word added to the Nicene Creed by the

Western Church *filioque*. The arguments spewed over whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son—*filioque*.

I dare say that the average Christian in both traditions cannot today give you a clear account of the difference.

I recall an involved discussion of a resolution on Islam in a church conference several years ago. It was shortly after 9-11, and feelings were running high about the religious radicals behind global terrorism, but we were also recognizing that Arabic-Islamic people were becoming the most hated minority in America. The resolution under discussion called for us to be “tolerant” of our Muslim brothers and sisters. One of my seminary classmates, Welton Gaddy spoke up, calling for a change in language. He reminded us that we are not admonished as Christians to “tolerate” others; we are called to love one another as Christ has loved us and even to love our enemies.

Paul urged his Roman Christian friends to put out the welcome mat to one another in spite of differences in their cultural and religious practices. He called for welcome and acceptance in the spirit of Christ even when he might differ with their conclusions. Scotch poet John Donne (1572-1631) reminds all who might have forgotten, life is too short for petty conflict, “No man is an island Entire of itself. . . Anyone’s death diminishes me. . .never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.”