

Genesis 50:15-21 ~ Romans 14:1-12

Getting Along With Each Other

15th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Rally Day! ~ Third Grade Bible Presentation

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The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture

“What’s the purpose of preaching?” That was a text I received from one of our college-aged teens last week. An excellent question that all of us may wonder about from time to time—yet I think this was the first time anybody asked me that question point blank. The scripture I’m about to preach on from Paul’s Letter to the Romans may help to answer it. At first glance this text it seems like people getting all wound up over trivial differences--non-issues to us, like eating meat or vegetables. Or differences about when and how to worship. Your first response may be, “What’s the big deal? Good thing we’re past those minor issues. We’ve got this. The Bible is such a big book, maybe we should just skip over this one.

So here comes the preacher who says, “Let’s try taking a step back and looking at the context.” We learn that the fight between the prime rib eaters and broccoli eaters was a an in-house hot-button controversy between non-Jews and the Jewish communities of Rome who were trying to be one unified church, together. Jewish Christians had observed Kosher dietary rules their whole lives, those practices had been a part of their identity since they were born. They needed to know how the meat had been slaughtered before they could eat it. Switching up their Sabbath observance, both the time and the place, was also a stretch. It messed with the rhythm of their whole week. Habits of body, mind and spirit go deep and don’t change overnight.

From those earliest days of Christianity to now: trusting the love of Jesus pushes us in new ways every day. The Rule of Loving others as Christ loves us calls for agility and adaptability when it comes to habits and spiritual practices. For me, preaching on Saturdays to a camera, instead of on Sundays to your beautiful faces in the pews has been a stretch. And still is, six months later. Especially in the mist of this disorienting pandemic, switching up our weekly rhythms and deeply ingrained habits, we get that.

To prepare us for the hearing of this scripture reading, I’m opening a window into this scripture’s backstory to help us see with our 2020 Wisconsin eyes what was at stake then and now. Yes, that’s part of the purpose of preaching. Listen for how these siblings in Christ were letting their cultural differences become wedge issues that threatened to divide and hurt each other. The Gentile Christians were judging the Jewish Christians. And vice versa. Don’t we always think that we are right? Don’t we always think we are the strong ones, whatever side we are on? Unity would be so easy if the other side would just wake up and see how wrong they are...Good thing we don’t fall into kind of thinking anymore... Actually, maybe *we do need to hear* what the Lord has to say to us about how to get along with people who seem so wrong-headed—through this reading of Paul’s Letter to the Romans chapter 14, beginning at verse 1.

Sermon

I just got a new phone this week. Those of you who have tried to text or call me with spotty results are perhaps sighing with relief. Or maybe shaking your heads. Yes: It's a rather amazing device! Now I can't blame my old, increasingly non-functional phone for missing a text dropping a picture, or leaving me stranded: because I have this brand new, perhaps *over* functioning phone. I asked if I could get the one that would write my sermons for me. Just Give Apple a few more years for that one... One of my new phone's snazzy features is its security system called "Face ID." It looks at my face, from any angle, and it recognizes me. "Oh yes, I'm your phone... you're in. Here you go."

This warm feeling of recognition from a smart phone struck me as a tiny inkling of the Divine recognition into which we are invited and challenged by both of this morning's scripture lessons. Although occurring about 1500 years apart, both lessons zoom us in to the middle of inner-family squabbles and struggles. The poignant story back in Genesis 50 between Joseph and his brothers, right after burying their father, Jacob. They fear that their now powerful brother Joseph, whom they had wronged so long ago, will not recognize or honor the divine family resemblance in all of their faces. Paul's pointed Letter to the church in Rome is also addressing squabbles and struggles that are obscuring their shared divine resemblance.

We may think "cancel culture" is a new thing. It's really an ancient thing with a new name—going all the way back to Cain and Abel. The Urban Dictionary explains, "canceling as "to dismiss something or somebody" and "to reject an individual or idea." And when people use the term unironically, it reveals a big problem with our culture. ... because cancel culture as it currently exists doesn't give people a chance to learn from or apologize for their wrongdoings." As much as Cain thought otherwise, we *are* our brother's keeper—God has been trying to teach us about this since Genesis 4. No matter how much we may dislike, disagree, or want to dismiss another person for any reason. "Here in this place, in this house where love can dwell and all can safely live" as our opening hymn tell us: Here in this place, God invites and challenges us to resist the sin of judging and cancelling another child of God.

Whenever we dismiss somebody, rejecting them outright, we are going against the Rule of Love in which we stay in the relationship knowing we can learn and grow from our wrongdoings. Loving someone doesn't mean we have to agree with them, or fall in line with their way of thinking when it goes against our sense of God's law of love and justice. That is *not* what this means. What I hear Paul doing here is a challenge to strip back our pet ideologies to the point of love and grace. He is calling us to our knees where we see that we can see more clearly how we are all struggling in one way or another. As Philo of Alexandria wrote long ago, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." Perhaps what we all share is the struggle. Surely our struggles are as unique and different as God create us. And it is from our knees, bowing to God alone, we begin to ID the faces of those we might otherwise cancel, in the light of Christ's love and grace. That is how God sees us.

When was the last time somebody hurt you? When were you last treated in a way that was not reflective of the relationship you thought you had? When was the last time somebody “did you wrong”? I’m pretty sure none of us had to think too far back to come up with a face or a situation. We can relate to Joseph, when we are in the pit, when we are in the moment of hurt, it can seem like forever. In that moment we feel trapped, it seems like it’s never going to get better. And we swear we will never let ourselves get into this situation again. But the truth is, we do not have that kind of power or foresight. We will get hurt and we will hurt others, intentionally and unintentionally. The 66 books of the Bibles we just gave to our third graders tell that story. But the power we do have is to choose the ultimate power of Divine Love and Grace: in the heat of the moment of conflict and discord. We have this power because of Christ who bridged every divide, and feels every hurt that we go through.

Christ who bridges not only divides like Green Bay Packers fans and Minnesota Viking fans, or vegetarians and carnivores, or when and how we wear our masks, but differences that go deeper, like our gender identity, politics, religion and race. I always thought that the root problem of racism and other divides like these, is ignorance and hate. But I learned otherwise from Ibram X. Kendi’s book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, he explained that the root problem of racism is not ignorance and hate, he writes, “that gets the chain of events exactly wrong. The root problem has always been the self-interest of racist power. Powerful economic, political, and cultural self-interest.”ⁱ

I believe the choice to relinquish the power that one has, like Joseph had in that moment over his brothers—the very ones who had once rendered him powerless in a pit, that choice is the lynchpin to leading with love and grace. The moment when you can control and manipulate and get the upper hand: that is the moment of truth. In that moment, Joseph chose grace. Paul is imploring those Romans who think they have the upper hand to let go of that power, and instead to choose grace. Here is our hope for how to get along with each other: To choose grace as a starting point for hard conversations that lead toward God’s law of Love for God and neighbor. To struggle together for the good, the peace and justice for all of God’s realm—across all divides. We can do this, because of Christ.

As Paul points out, there is no divide that Christ cannot and has not crossed—not even the ultimate divide between the living and the dead. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has bridged that one, too. Although these two scriptures speak to “in house” or inter-family squabbles and divides, as our world keeps shrinking due to globalization and climate change, I believe the definition of family keeps expanding. Surely God sees us as all one family, the human family, figuring out how to reach across our divides so that we can share with grace, this one beautiful earth that Jesus went to hell and back to save.

How do you know when the night is over and the day has dawned? This is the opening to an old Rabbi story I want to close us with. How do you know when the night is over and the day has dawned? It is when you can look into the face of any person and see there the face of your sibling. Because if you cannot do that, no matter how bright it is, you are still in the night.ⁱⁱ Are you, as we still in the night? Picture again, the person or group of people that seem “weak” or

“different” or you cannot get along with. Or picture again the person you thought of who hurt you most recently. Keep looking at that face until you see the family resemblance, the Divine ID, who says, “You too, are mine.”

ⁱ Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be An Antiracist*, (One World: New York, NY, 2019), pp.42-43.

ⁱⁱ Bruce McKay, from “Dawn” stories, *Christian Century*, August 12, 2020, p. 24.