

Proper 19 Year A 2017
September 17, 2017

I know what you all are thinking. I thought the same thing when I read our lesson this morning from Romans. And yes, it seems Paul has completely contradicted every thing I said last week in my sermon.

But to my defense Jesus said it. I just expounded on it. Jesus said if a member of the church sins against you then make every effort to restore them to right relationship with God,
the community and yourself.
But if they are unwilling to confess and repent then they have to go.

And here we have Paul saying stuff like
“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?
Or why do you despise your brother or sister?
For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God”

Okay I get it and I know it looks bad
but give me a moment to sort this thing out because
I don't think Paul is contradicting Jesus or me.

Paul is not suggesting a sort of
Liaise faire attitude to sin.
All of this hinges on a couple words from Romans.
The very first line reads
“Welcome those who are weak in the faith,
but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions
or as another translation puts it
“quarreling over disputable issues”

You see Paul here is not talking about sin as Jesus was

but rather disputable issues.
So what were the disputable issues?
Well food and days of devotion are the examples Paul uses.

In the early church they disputed over whether
Christians should eat meat
that had been sacrificed at pagan altars.
For a new Christian who had come from the pagan world
abstinence might have been necessary to stay faithful
while someone more mature in the faith would say
“those idols and temples are nothing
in Christ we are free from such slavery”
they also disputed over special days of devotion
each were trying to be faithful in their own way
but it seems they would argue and quarrel
about who was right and who was wrong
causing strife and dissension in the church

I believe what Paul was saying is
we as a community of faith
can not tear each other apart
over these non-essentials of the faith.
Whose eating what, on what day does not really matter.
So stop tearing apart the fabric of the church over it

As Rubert Meldinus an 18th century
Lutheran theologian wrote
“Unity in Essentials, In non-essentials liberty,
in all things charity”
I think that is what Paul was getting at.

These fledgling communities of faith
were struggling to live into the tension of diversity.

Paul is teaching here that we have to be
gracious with each other about

the non essentials of the faith.

One of the things, which fractured
and nearly destroyed the Episcopal Church 15 yrs. ago
was a controversy over human sexuality.

And Christ Church was spit in two.
Over a third of the parish left
and formed another church because
they could not abide with
the more progressive direction of the Episcopal Church.

Those who stayed were not necessary on board with
the positions of the National Church
but they stayed because they loved Jesus and Christ Church
and the people of their community.

Now here comes a provocative point. You ready for it.
Who is sleeping with who is not an essential of the faith.

And let me clear I am not advocating
promiscuity or infidelity.
We are called to be upright and moral people,
living examples of the grace, mercy and love of God.
I am talking about sex with in
committed monogamous relationships.

And I understand and support
the arguments regarding the authority of scripture
and issues of human sexuality particularly homosexuality.

But whether we like it or not. In our day and age
it is a disputable issue.

Now more conservative people
see it as a scriptural and moral issue,
that homosexuality is a sin.

While those with a more liberal perspective
see it as a social justice issue.
And because both sides view it differently
They typically talk right past the other
because neither accepts the others
foundational premise for their argument.

On our staff and vestry we have once again broached issue
and both of these leadership groups are split.
Some see it as a moral issue
and some see it as a social justice issue.
And that tells me we are still
in the midst of this painful controversy
even though we have not dared to address it as of late
because the wounds of 15 years ago are still too fresh.

But I will say it again.
Who is sleeping with who is not an essential of the faith.
What are essentials of the faith
That Jesus is the son of God incarnate
that he was with out sin and died for our sins,
rose from the dead and ascended to heaven
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.
And the scriptures are the inspired Word of God

Now you all know that I lean towards
the more conservative perspective on this issue.
But again I do not see it as an essential of the faith
and I have brothers and sisters in this diocese
who are clergy who are openly gay and lesbian
in same sex marriages
And they love Jesus and the church as much as I do.
I may not agree with them on this issue but
I would not question their faith or
their devotion to the call of the gospel.

I have chosen to stay in the Episcopal Church
and to live in the tension of this community,
valuing the gifts and graciousness
which my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters
bring to the community of faith.
with whom I do not agree on this issue,

Listen as Paul says “Who are you to pass judgment
on the servant of another?
And “Why do you pass judgment on you brother or sister?
Or why do you despise your brother or sister?
For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God”

Now I know some of you may not see it the way I see it
but our love of Jesus must be stronger
then those things we do not agree upon.

And listen, there are tons of other things
we don't see eye to eye on in this community.
From politics, to social justice issues
To how we do the liturgy to the music
All of them are non-essentials of the faith

So why the emphasis on human sexuality? because
I have been here over 4 years and 4 yrs ago
Christ Church was too fragile to broach this issue
but now we are stronger as a community
and have the capacity to name the tension we live in.

You see for the majority of church we are part of
homosexuality is seen as disputable issue.
Listen the culture and the church have shifted
and I may not agree with it but
this is the reality we live in and in the end
God will be the judge.

Who am I to judge a brother or sister
 who I know loves Jesus and the church
and is committed to the gospel in every way as I am
 except on this one point, this disputable issue.
Am I then to disregard the whole of who they are
 and the good work they are doing for the kingdom, no!
Just like I would not want them to disregard me
 and the good work we share because
 I am on the other side of the issue.

Paul is writing to an infant church
 which is struggling to live into the tension of diversity.
And I would love to tell you
 we have matured over 2000 years
 but the evidence says otherwise.

The Episcopal Church has split
 over and over during the last 2 centuries,
first during the revolution over who was loyal to the crown
 and who was loyal to the revolutionaries,
then over prayer book revisions of the 1892, 1929 and 1979
 and unfortunately I am sure we will split again
 when the next Prayer Book comes out.

We have split over the ordination of women in the 1970s
and human sexuality in the early 2000s
and each time the witness and power of the church
 has been diminished and marred because
some felt they had to be right at the expense of unity.
 It is always easier to be right than be in relationship

Listen the greatest witness to the world
 of the power of God is the unity of the church.
As Paul wrote the Ephesians
 “**Make every effort to** keep the unity of the Spirit
 through the bond of peace.”
Can we as Christ Church

make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit
through the bond of peace?”

Can we live in community trusting each other
that we love Jesus more than

what has the potential to divide us?

Can we be a witness to the world

that brothers and sisters in Christ

can be unified in the essentials of the faith,
while exercising liberty and charity

in the non essentials of the faith and in doing so

showing the world there is a different way to live?

Can we as the church in a

politically polarized and conflicted nation

been seen as a place of cooperation, care and collaboration
even when we disagree?

Listen this church will never be

monochrome over the issues

which face our nation and our church,

from human sexuality, to immigration, to healthcare,
to politics and theology.

We will always be a mixing bowl

of ideas and positions bouncing off each other,
influencing each other, changing each other
and banging into each other.

That is the nature of living in community.

The thing that binds us together is

Jesus and our love of Jesus.

I believe the world needs to see the church

being something other than

divisive, morally superior and removed.

I believe the world needs to see the church

wading into the complexity and pain of our world
unified by the love of Jesus

they need to see our willingness to be one
when we don't agree and see our unity in our desire
to be of service and care to the world.
And also our unity in proclaiming Jesus as Lord and savior.

Can we be that kind of Church?

Can we have those

respectful and difficult conversations
among ourselves and those in our lives

with out having to draw lines in the sand
and stand in judgment over others

but rather make Jesus the center of who we are

and how we live and move and have our being
as we try to live our life and faith together.

Can we? We can and we should and we will.