

Weak and Strong Must Get Along

In the name of him before whom every knee shall bend and every tongue shall confess to be God to the glory of the Father, dear friends in Christ: In our time together last week, we heard from St. Paul about the debt we owe to love one another. The person who loves, he said, fulfills the entire law of God. And looking at last week's Gospel reading we saw how Jesus applied this obligation we have to love each other to two specific considerations. The first was how we are to avoid doing or saying anything that might damage or undermine a fellow believer's faith and trust in the Lord Jesus or somehow lead them into sin and doubt. The second was the duty we have to confront and attempt to restore a brother or sister in Christ who has fallen into unrepentant sin. And these two issues are really the flip sides of the same coin. We have to be aware that our actions or lack of actions have consequences that potentially put others at risk of being lost forever. This isn't a game we're playing here in the church; this is about eternal life and death. It's like we're a lifeboat together – the lifeboat of trust in Christ and his accomplished work on the cross – and we must be careful that we don't through our negligence, inattention, or deliberate action push anyone overboard or fail to attempt to save someone who has fallen overboard. Christian love demands that we look out for each other and do everything within our power to keep everyone safely in the lifeboat. Failure to do so means that we're not acting in love towards one another, and so puts us at risk of falling or being tossed overboard ourselves.

But that was last week. In this week's readings we hear of more obligations we have for each other in the church as we live together under the law of Christ's love. From today's Gospel we hear of the absolute necessity of forgiving those who sin against us. And it only makes sense. By his suffering and death on the cross Jesus paid the infinite debt we owed to God on account of all our sins. How could we not, then, living in his blood bought forgiveness, cancel the comparatively minor debts of those who sin against us? Having received such great mercy so freely from God, how could we not also show mercy to others? And again, failure to do so would only prove that you don't understand, appreciate, or trust the gift of grace you have received – which means you don't belong in the boat. And that's what happens to the unforgiving guy in the parable. He gets tossed overboard. And Jesus said, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Those are words to think long and hard about. So before moving on, I'm going to pause here for a moment so that each one of us can reflect on the standing grudges we may have against others. *Now* is the time to recognize the evil, to repent of it, and trusting in Christ's forgiveness, to resolve to cancel the debt and no longer hold it against the person or persons who sinned against you. Go ahead. I'll wait ... and do some inward reflection myself ...

... Good. Is everyone back in the boat? Then let's move on to today's Epistle which has to do with how, in Christian love, we are to view others who are with us in the boat – or the *Ark* of the church. The issue here has to do with dealing with those whom St. Paul says are weak in the faith. And it would be best if I explained exactly what he means when he uses the word *weak*. Remember that Paul is writing to the first century church at Rome. And what you've got in this congregation are believers from two significantly different backgrounds. Some of them came to Jesus from the Jewish faith. They saw Jesus as the fulfillment of all the things God had promised his people. But as adherents of the Jewish faith, they were used to following all the Old Testament ceremonial laws that were meant to point to Christ and to keep the people of

God separate and distinct from the nations and in this way preserve the line of ancestry that led to Jesus. So, for instance, they had a lot of dietary prohibitions. They weren't allowed to eat pork, shellfish, crustaceans, and various kinds of birds. These and others foods were off limits. They also had all kinds of special days they were to observe, like the weekly Sabbath, the monthly New Moon, and annual festivals like Passover, Harvest of First Fruits, the Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles, and a few others. And each one of these days and feast seasons had specific instructions in the Law of Moses for how the people were to keep them, as well as any number of traditions that had grown up around them as part of Jewish culture – sort of like trees, wreathes, lights, and gifts are part of our culture's celebration of Christmas. So understand that all these practices were to them both required religious duty *and* an integral part of the pattern of their lives. It's just how they did things.

So that was one group in the church at Rome: the Christians with Jewish backgrounds. The other group was composed of, well, *Romans*, citizens of the city. Gentiles. Former pagans. Before coming to faith in Christ they were sacrificing pigs on the altars of their false gods Jupiter, Venus, and Mars. Obviously they gave up pagan practices like that when they became Christians. With respect to spiritual matters they had to learn a whole new way of life.

But a big question arose about these formerly pagan converts. It was this: How much of the Old Testament ceremonial law that God required of his people Israel did they have to make part of their lives? Did they have to start observing the dietary prohibitions? Did they have to keep the Sabbath Day, the feasts, and the festivals? Did their men have to be circumcised as the law required? The answer was no. The Holy Spirit guided the Apostles and other church leaders to see very early on that these things were merely shadows and pictures that were meant to point people to Christ. And if you've got Christ – if you already believe in him – you don't need the pointers to help you find him. You might think of these things as the scaffolding set up while the building, namely the Church of Christ, was under construction. But once the building is done, you don't need scaffolding anymore. You take it down. So Christians from Gentile backgrounds never had to follow all these Jewish ceremonial laws; which I suppose was easy for them since a lot of the laws were really a pain in the neck to keep. They had enough trouble just learning what it meant to be a Christian.

Ah, but what about the former Jews? Some of them picked up the idea right away. They saw that faith in Christ was intended the goal of all these things. And now having come to Christ, which is what these laws were meant to help them do, they were freed from having to observe them. If they wanted pork chops or steamed clams for supper, they could have them. No problem. The Sabbath, the Passover and other festivals, these things were fulfilled in Christ. No need to keep them anymore. Other former Jews, however, had much more difficulty with the concept. Yes, they believed in Jesus, that he was the promised Messiah and their Savior from sin; but they just couldn't get over the idea that they were now free in Christ from the ceremonial laws. "B-b-b-but it's in the Bible!" they insisted. "It's what God told us to do! We've been doing it all our lives! How can we just stop doing what God said?" These are the people weak in faith to whom Paul is referring in this morning's Epistle. They've got Jesus; they trust in him. But they just haven't got a fully mature understanding of all that means and what the ramifications are. So they still clung to all their old traditions and customs and kept doing them. Or, if you'll allow me to tweak the scaffolding idea a bit, it's like they wanted to leave the training wheels on their bicycles after they learned how to ride.

What do you do with such people – or to be more specific, what should more mature Christians in the church do with such people? That's the question Paul is answering in today's reading. And his answer is quite simple: welcome them, he says. And why not? They're

sinners just like you. They trust in Christ just like you. They belong to his Church just like you. Okay, so they haven't got it all figured out yet. What better place to learn the truth and grow in their faith than among you who do have that part figured out?

But, Paul says, don't welcome them to argue over opinions. And that could cut both ways. On one hand, it could be understood to mean that those who were more mature shouldn't welcome a person with weak faith with the intention of ambushing them, everyone pouncing upon them to tell them how wrong they are and how infantile their theology is. That's only going to drive them away. They need to be dealt with patiently and with love so that with time and sound teaching they can get a better handle on the idea of their freedom in Christ and get over their hang ups with keeping the ceremonial law. On the other hand, it could also be that someone with weak faith who was hung up on the ceremonial law only wanted to join the assembly so that he could argue his point of view with everyone else in order to set them on what he thought of as the right path. Such a one is essentially trying to impose himself as the teacher of the congregation. And Paul elsewhere deals with such people. He calls them the enemies of the Gospel who are trying to enslave people to the law. You've been set free in Christ; don't allow yourself to come under bondage again. So, if they've come to learn and to know Christ better, great. But if they've come to try to enslave you with laws that have already served their purpose and are no longer needed, it's best to show them the door.

Okay. That has to do with newcomers. What about a congregation that already consists of people on opposing sides of these issues? How should the two sides view each other? To the more mature Christians Paul says, don't look down on those whose faith is weak or think of yourself as being better than them. And that makes sense: no one is born with a complete understanding of the Gospel. We all had to start at the beginning. We're all in the process of learning. To be sure, after a lifetime of study there's still more to learn. So, just because you're farther along doesn't make you better than anyone. And it's only by God's grace you know and believe what you do. So don't snub or insult them. They believe that by doing what they're doing they are honoring the Lord. So be considerate. Be compassionate. Help them. Pray for them. They'll get there eventually.

And to those who are weak in faith Paul says, don't judge or condemn those who understand that in Christ they are free from the ceremonial laws. This would have been the temptation, naturally, because the weak in faith thought of violations of the ceremonial law as sins against God. They didn't see the difference. God said don't murder people, and God said don't eat pork. To them it was the same. But the first is *moral* law. It has to do with keeping the Law of Love. Obviously if you love your neighbor, you won't murder him, nor will you steal from him, lie about him, or try to seduce his wife. These laws have to do with basic questions of right and wrong, and they still stand today. But what you choose to eat, or what day you choose to worship, or whether you keep this feast or that—what's that have to do with loving your neighbor? None of these things harms him in any way. The weak in faith had yet to learn the distinction.

Of course, by calling those who held this point of view "weak", Paul has already said, "You guys have some growing to do." Therefore do not presume to judge others in these matters. They believe that by living in the freedom they have in Christ to do what they do, they are giving honor to him. And it's before Christ that they stand. He will judge them. That's not your job.

And then Paul wraps up this section of teaching with a reminder of how in the church we are all united in Christ. "For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we

live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living." Paul's goal, it seems, is to raise their focus from their petty squabbling over matters of Christian freedom to the bigger issue of what the Church is all about. It's about living together in Christ. It's about daily dying to self in Christ, being forgiven of sins, and rising to live for each other in his love. It's about preparing ourselves to one day die for the last time in Christ so that in him we may stand before God in the judgment and be declared holy and righteous in his sight. It's all about Christ. It's about what he did and is doing to keep us all safely in the Ark of the Church and carry us through to the promised goal.

And this is still true for us in our day. No, I doubt there are any of us who are fixated on keeping the Old Testament ceremonial laws. In general, we're not arguing about such things; although they do come up now and then, especially when someone is being influenced by writings or teachers from other church bodies that haven't got this stuff figured out yet. What we do have, however, are churchly customs and traditions that are matters of Christian freedom *and* people at various stages of spiritual maturity. And the same general principles apply.

The use of alcohol is a good example. Due to the heavy influence in our culture of a number of churches which teach that the use of alcohol in any form is a sin, some even in our own number have grave reservations about it. And if they see someone else having a drink or buying a six-pack of beer, though they may not say anything, that person gets lowered a few notches in their sight. But the Bible prohibits drunkenness, not the use of alcohol in moderation. So no one ought to judge another in such a way. If you can have a drink in your Christian freedom and give thanks and honor to God for it, have at it. But at the same time, don't look down on your brother or sister in Christ who does have a problem with it.

In my own work, I often run into pastors and people who are obsessed with certain aspects of how the church worships. Some say the church must offer Holy Communion every service. Others say a pastor must only choose only the week's Gospel reading as the text for his sermon (I messed up this week). Others say you can only use the chalice for Communion, that those little plastic cups bring dishonor the blood of Christ. There's lots of stuff like that out there. And, of course, if they came here and saw what we're doing week to week, they'd judge that we're wrong and that I was leading you astray. The flip side of it, the temptation for me, is to think that I'm superior to them because I'm not caught up in the patterns of such legalistic thinking.

My point is that the problem that Paul is addressing hasn't gone away. In the church there will always be weak and strong Christians. And in these matters of Christian freedom, weak and strong must get along, neither thinking ourselves holier or better for the grace we've been given to understand things more maturely, nor assuming the role of judge over those who are exercising their Christian freedom; but always keeping our focus on Christ Jesus our Lord who for us lived, for us died, and for us rose again that we might live together in his love and forgiveness. May he grant us the grace to do so here, now and always. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!