

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

THE INDISPENSABLE APOSTROPHE

Romans 14:1-12

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Marcus Felde

1Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. 2Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. 4Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 6Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

7We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."

12So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

DIAGNOSIS: Playing “King of the Hill”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): “For the Purpose of Quarreling”

The purpose of church is not to quarrel. It is not to establish the superiority of my judgment over yours. Not to tell you what to do. But isn't that what people do? Even the signs in front of churches are assertions of confidence in our judgments: “Come as you are” means “Unlike the stuffy churches down the street, we think dressing up for church is so yesterday.” “Lutheran Church” means “We agree with Dr. Luther!” The tiresome exchange of fire over one issue or another resembles a World War I battlefield. A reasonable person might think these differences are our reason for being. It's a culture war; we want our side to win. Judging them wrong, we despise our brothers and sisters, rejoicing when our opinion gains ascendancy.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): “We Are the Lords” (no apostrophe)

Our confidence is in our own perceptions, our own judgments, our own minds. We know better. The effect is that we expect others to acknowledge our wisdom and “bow down” to us. This insistence stems from over-trusting 1) the Law, as though it facilitates peace; and 2) Appearances, as though the way we see others is the way God sees them. Huh-uh.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Accountable to God
Accountability to God might be a good thing! Except that because we have made people fall whom the Lord would make to stand, we have been opposing God. At the judgment seat of God, it will not be a good thing if we hear God say (a la v. 4) “Who are you?” Jesus did not warn us that God will throw us into prison to be tortured if we fail to stamp out sin, but if we fail to forgive sin (Matthew 18:35). That's a big ouch.

PROGNOSIS: Worshipping the King on the Hill

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Christ Welcomed No-Account Good-for-Nothings

If any social transaction is the purpose of the church, it is (not judging but) welcoming others. A few verses after our reading, Paul writes “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Judge/Welcome. What an interesting opposition. Christ has welcomed us!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): “We Are the Lord’s” (note the apostrophe)

When I read this passage out loud, as at a funeral, I worry about the misunderstanding of the phrase “We are the Lord’s.” People could mistake that last word for its homonym and think I said “We are the lords,” a catastrophic misread which could only happen when antonyms become homonyms! We are most definitely not the lords! Yes, “all things are yours” (1 Corinthians 3:21); but “you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor 3:22). Don’t mess with the little ones who belong to me, Jesus warned, unless you can swim with a millstone around your neck.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): “For the Purpose of Welcoming”

If any social transaction is central to the purpose of the church, it is certainly not the judging but the welcoming of others; which is to say, not the identification but the forgiveness of sins. A few verses after our reading, Paul writes “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Judge/Welcome. Interesting antonyms. Since we are set free by Christ from the necessity of lording it over others (even and especially in the church—“it will not be so among you,” Matthew 20:26), we have the pleasure of serving our brothers and sisters: welcoming, hosting, waiting tables, washing feet. “For to this end Christ died and lived again, so

that HE might be Lord of both the dead and the living”—making us all one, instead of constantly dividing us, as our quarreling does.