

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

The Christ-ening of Communities

Romans 14:1-12

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 19)

Analysis by James Squire

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: Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Judging for Ourselves*

Group dynamics can get out of whack sometimes. Even church communities are not immune to this. Bonding and the forming of cliques are the standard fare in any group of people who have formed over a cause or a mission, and inevitably we start looking at each other and deciding who is “with the program” and who is not. The weak among us provoke our commentary for reasons that may not always be obvious-even to us. But if we had no one to argue with, we might get bored (v. 1). Perhaps the weak present to us a golden opportunity to oppose or despise someone (v. 3). Or perhaps we are intoxicated by our own freedom and we feel compelled to judge the lack of freedom we see in others. Paul calls each of these examples, “passing judgment on servants of another” (v. 4), and therein lies the beginning of our problem. These people we judge do not belong to us, even though we act like they do.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Living to Ourselves*

We’d like to think that such judging is on behalf of Christ, but Paul shoots down that rationalization: “It is before their own lord that they stand or fall.” The truth of the matter is that we have perverted Christ’s freedom into a legalistic cause, even if it is about “freedom.” Such “freedom” is our legalism, not Christ’s. It is how we choose to live, and it is how we expect others to live. Christ may have handed us the message, but we make it our own and legislate it our own way. Whether we observe

the day or not, whether we eat or abstain, we do it to honor ourselves, not the Lord (v. 6). Of course, we think this is the way Christ would want it. We easily convince ourselves that we are looking out for his interests, but even if that is what we are doing, that still is the problem: we trust our own authority over the message instead of trusting Christ's authority.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Dying to Ourselves*

The bottom line is that our own authority is not the highest authority in our lives. There will come a day when “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (v. 10). Before that authority, our own authority dissolves into nothing. Now we become the weaklings, the ones who cannot measure up to standards. We live by the sword of legalism; we will die of it, as long as we belong to ourselves instead of the Lord. On our own, accountability to God is a death sentence.

PROGNOSIS: Die by the Cross, Live by the Cross

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Dying to Christ*

“For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (v. 9). The old bottom line has been superseded. We were not only misusing Christ's message, we were also misunderstanding it and how it applies to us. The Lord of the living and the dead has hijacked even our accountability before the judgment seat of God. Our dying before that judgment seat-whether officially on the last day or now in our present helplessness before that judgment seat-has been swallowed up in the crucifixion of Christ, so that now we die not to ourselves but to the Lord, and then we live to the Lord because dying is no longer the last word.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Living to Christ*

Such legalism was not exactly invented by us. It has its origin in God's Law. That Law was pointed right at us, straight from

the judgment seat. It still is, yet somehow in Christ that Law has been disarmed. "And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand" (v. 4). We are no longer threatened by the legalism that turned against us, and in fact we have experienced the end of legalism in our lives. There is no room anymore for legalism, now that Christ has given us life in him. Before, the message was intellectual, something to debate about, tempting us to lord our own interpretation of freedom over others. Now we have experienced that message in the flesh. It has touched our lives. Christ has become too real in our lives to want to go back to the old legalism. He is our Lord, and that is no longer an abstract concept. It is concrete in our lives; we know that without it we would be dead. We are convinced (v. 5).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Leaving the Judging to Christ

Gone too is our legalism toward others. Our foretaste of God's judgment seat and Christ's actions there on our behalf has reoriented our actions toward others. Popular group dynamics no longer dictates how we deal with each other. Christ is now in the center of our group dynamic, and the dynamic emanates from him. We "welcome those who are weak in the faith" no longer "for the purpose of quarreling over opinions" but because it takes weakling to know a weakling. What is more, we discover what freedom in Christ truly is this: The freedom to refrain from imposing our freedom on others.