

**Rom. 14: 13-22**

**First Presbyterian Church**

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This is the season of harvest. And every farmer will tell you that for there to be a harvest you have to have the right combination of soil, water, and sun and a lack of pests, and damaging storms. For fruits and vegetables to grow you have to have or produce the right climate. If you work in a laboratory and you are trying to grow bacteria you have to use the right cultures. The substance in the petri dish must promote the growth you are aiming for. Everyone knows that when you start a business you have to be wise about the conditions of the market, the demand for your product, and the atmosphere of the economy. Businesses started under the wrong conditions find it difficult to survive let alone flourish.

We don't always pay attention to the conditions in which we live. More or less we take them for granted. But just like fruits, vegetables, bacteria, and businesses we grow best in a certain kind of climate or culture. I'm sure you have all seen the poster that says kids become what they live - "if a child lives with criticism he or she will learn to be critical, if they live with violence they will become violent, if they live with acceptance they will be open to their world".

For a couple of weeks now we have been considering the problem of conflict. Its something we all encounter and something which affects our lives in a multitude of ways. We have considered our response to conflict and we have considered the possibility that conflict might be an opportunity. Jesus calls us to be peacemakers in the world meaning that we have to make the most of the situations of conflict we find ourselves in. Peacemaking is

not refusing to fight, it is working through the conflict to a resolution everyone can live with. Peacemaking is hard work and work that we are not well equipped to undertake.

In our text for this morning Paul is talking to people he has not met. He is talking to the Christians in Rome. A mixture of converted Jews, people who came out of some of the mystery religions and those who had no religious background at all. Paul is talking to people who are having a very difficult time getting along because they have different ideas about what they must do - or refrain from doing - now that they are Christians. Some want to continue the strict dietary laws they followed as Jews. Some want to do away with all the laws regarding food. Some find that eating certain foods or drinking wine reminds them of the practices of the cults they have come out of and they do not want to do such things now that they have been rescued. And the real issue, of course, is that each group thinks that their way of thinking is the only right way and that everyone should do it their way.

And in verse 19 Paul gets to the heart of the matter when he says, "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building." The way to settle the problem isn't to make one way the rule that everyone must follow. I believe what Paul is suggesting here is that together they must create a climate where peace can grow. They have to do those things which will create a culture of peace.

We do not live in a world where the climate is conducive to peace. We live in a world where competition is the prevailing climate; where we are pitted against one another, where we become rivals, and many relationships are adversarial. We compete for jobs and recognition; we compete for our fair share of the market; we compete with our siblings, the people at work

and the neighbors; we compete with the clothes we wear, and the cars we drive and the houses we live in. We live in a world filled with competition. Yesterday we cheered as Colorado beat Oklahoma and the Rockies beat the Diamondbacks. Every advertisement you see is competing for your business. Our capitalist society is built on the foundation of economic competition. We compete with other nations for the resources we need for our way of life. Competition does not build a climate where peace can flourish.

Jesus calls us to be peacemakers and Paul says that one of the first steps in that calling is to create a culture of peace. Maybe we can't influence our world but we can make a decision that our churches and our homes will be places that are conducive to peace. We can decide that here we will not be in competition with one another.

Even though this passage is all about dietary laws there are principles here which we can use as we create a climate that will produce peace. In vs. 13 Paul says "let us no longer pass judgment on one another". The people he was writing to were judging one another's faith on the basis of dietary restrictions. They seem to have forgotten that they were all saved and given faith by the grace of God. In vs. 22 he says, "the faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God". They had come to faith by different routes and the way that faith materialized in each of them was slightly different. Paul encourages them to live by the faith they have without trying to make others do it the same way.

But the main point that Paul wants to impress on the Christians in Rome is that above all they have a responsibility to the others in the congregation, especially to those who may be new or young in the faith. More important than the dietary rules they are arguing over is to walk in

love with one another. The communion of the body takes precedence over individual interpretations of the faith. You are free to have your opinions and your practices but you are not free to enforce them on others. Instead you are to do everything you can to build up one another in the faith. The kingdom of God is not about food and drink but about righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

We are undertaking a study of peacemaking and we hope that everyone in the congregation will take the class this year or next because we believe that what was true in ancient Rome is still true today. There is too often great conflict in the church. We live in a world that promotes a climate of competition and winning. But we as Christians should work to create here, of all places, a climate that will allow peace to grow. A climate that would become the template for our homes and maybe even our workplaces. A climate that would allow us individually to grow into peacemakers.

Nothing can grow in a hostile environment. And so the church of Jesus Christ must always be a welcoming and accepting place. A place of safety. A place where people can come together without fear of being judged unchristian or not Christian enough. We have each been given the gift of faith through the grace of God. And I dare say not one of us completely understands that grace. None of us has all the right answers. We are all weak and stumbling trying to make sense of it all. We do not have perfectly thought out theologies. We are inconsistent in what we believe and how we live. But Christ accepts us and we need to accept one another. The kingdom isn't about our inconsistencies, it is the joy of acceptance in spite of the inconsistencies.

Will we have differences? Of course. The point is what we do with those differences. Will we use them as opportunities to learn more about the

faith as seen through someone else's eyes, someone else's understanding of God, or will we use them as criteria for judging? Will we choose to put the relationships first and opinions second? The church should always be a place of dialog. But it must be dialog that builds up and creates a climate where growth can happen. It can never be dialog that destroys the spirit or tears down the person or eats away at faith.

As you know we have three grown sons. At the wedding rehearsal dinner for one of them the middle one rose to his feet held up his glass and said, "Here's to my brother. We are the worst of enemies and the best of friends." They disagree about religion, and politics, and parenting, and money and they can have some pretty spirited debates. But they have never let those things destroy the bonds of love that bind them together. And if you take on one of them you have all three on your hands. As the younger one has said, "I always know they have my backside". I think that's how Paul envisioned the church as a family that puts the bonds of love first.

Let us pray.