

## **Sermon for the 15th Sunday of Pentecost**

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*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live in the Lord; and if we die, we die in the Lord. -Romans 14*

While preparing my sermon this week, I came across a line in a commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans that troubled me at first. The author, Israel Kamudzandu, noted that in this letter "the Apostle Paul observes that the human condition, in all its form and nature, is marked by wickedness. Consciously, intentionally, and with a clear mind, the human family dehumanises and pulls down those who do not belong to the tribe."<sup>1</sup> I struggled not with the author's observation, but with this notion of the human condition as marked by wickedness. I've long felt, and still strongly believe, in the fundamental goodness of the human person. While I'm profoundly aware that our condition is marred by sin and injustice, I find it difficult to accept that our condition is wicked.

That is, until I watch videos of persons of colour brutally beaten and killed. Or read of refugees denied basic human rights simply for the colour of their skin or the places from which they come. Or witness supposed Christian leaders justifying hate and violence against persons of colour or of persons who hold opposing ideological positions. The fact that prominent Christian leaders support a world leader despite his promotion of violence, sexism, and hatred simply because he upholds their Christian "values" leaves me to ponder the power of sin to even distort the best of hearts.

Perhaps the human condition is really inflicted with wickedness.

The world in which we live in now is not all that dissimilar to that of Paul's world and the church of Rome, the recipient of the epistle we read today. Rome, at the epicentre of the empire, was a meeting place of peoples from many different lands. Ethnically diverse, the city of a million people likely drew people from various parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The Christian church in Rome was likewise ethnically diverse, with Jews and Gentiles mixed together, although not always happily so. The Roman world, like our own, was divided between weak and strong, wealthy and poor, educated and uneducated. Those divisions, just as in our world, led to a social and political system whereby some were marginalised and oppressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Israel Kamudzandu, "Commentary on Romans 14:1-12," *Working Preacher*

The church of Rome, similar to the Christian church today — particularly here in North America — was a divided church. The early Christian community was torn by cultural and religious differences.

On the one hand, there were among the members of the community Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah and who were faithful to the laws of the Torah, such as circumcision and dietary rules. On the other hand, there were among their number Gentiles, non-Jewish persons who likely comprised of persons from various ethnic backgrounds, who did not abide by the same practices. Those who abided by the Jewish law of the day argued the necessity of keeping the law for justification, a common and still relevant theme in Judaism. Needless to say, however, that was not an attractive prospect for the Gentile men among their number who were not circumcised. If one's justification was dependent upon the work of the law (circumcision), then the men would have to endure that painful procedure in order to be justified and to share in the God's redemption.

While I am sure most of you never thought you would have to hear so much discussion in church about such a personal procedure, the debate raised serious theological questions for the early disciples of Jesus. While many of us assume the debate was about faith and works, it really was a question about Jesus and the meaning and purpose of his sacrifice on the cross. Was it redemptive (did it save us) or does our adherence to the Law of Moses (the Ten Commandments, the mandate to circumcise, and the hundreds of others laws listed in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus) justify us and make us righteous in the eyes of God. If we answer that Jesus' death on the cross is what justifies us (makes us right in the eyes of God), then what about the Law?

This is where the debate became deeply personal. Imagine, if you can, someone challenging your entire religious experience and understanding; how would that make you feel? Now imagine their questions challenging your entire understanding of yourself; how would that make you feel? While we may easily dismiss the Jewish observance of the Law of Moses as simply religious ritual and tradition, their observance defined who they were as a people. Circumcision was a sign that they were God's beloved and chosen people. Their adherence to the some six hundred rules in the Law defined their fidelity to the God of Abraham, the God of Jacob, and the God of Moses. It signified their intimate and deep relationship with God, the very God who brought them out of slavery and oppression and into life. Yet one man's

death and a new Jewish movement suddenly upended everything the Jewish people knew of the world and their very identity. To be frank, I'm not sure we Christians could comprehend the immensity of this momentous shift.

Yet the disciples were confronted by Jesus' death and resurrection with a new reality. While Matthew reminds us in his gospel that Jesus came not to abolish the Law but to fulfil it, Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection did alter the course of human history. And the stories of the gospels and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles reveal Jesus' disciples experienced something utterly profound and life-changing: in Jesus they found life. The community could not deny their new religious experience. However, as good Jewish people, how do they reconcile what they know with what they experience in Jesus?

Those of you who pray morning prayer with me heard last week the story of disciples' acceptance of Gentiles and their recognition that God was very much with them just as he was with their Jewish brothers and sisters. We read on Tuesday from the Book of Acts the story of Peter's dream whereby God ordered him to eat of all the animals of the earth, even those considered unclean and prohibited by the Law. Peter, confused and perplexed by the vision, questions God as to why he would make him eat that which is not pure. God's response is startling: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 11) Moreover, Peter tells his friends that he was led by three men to a Gentile's house and was commanded by the Holy Spirit not to make distinction between his people and the stranger, the foreigner. Peter's dream and the Spirit's leading of him radically changed the course of the early Christian community. While they did not ridicule the Law and still held it in high regard, they understood that God was bringing about something new. Moreover, Peter's dream and the disciples' discernment of his message led the early Christian community to no longer require circumcision of the converts to their way. They simply had to have faith in Christ and his cross, for it is Christ's death and resurrection that justifies us, not adherence to the Law.

We cannot underestimate the significance of this move and the turmoil it must've caused for the disciples of Jesus. Remember, they were all devout and faithful Jews. In fact, the Book of Acts and several of Paul's letters make clear the early Christian community fought vigorously over this. Yet their experience of Jesus opened their eyes to something new.

This now brings us back to Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul's epistle to the church in Rome articulates the Christian community's belief that Jesus is the same God who revealed himself to Abraham; and like our Father Abraham, we are to have faith in him. Paul goes on to say that it is Christ who justifies us, not our adherence to the Law or any action we do. Simply put, there's nothing we can do to win our righteousness; Christ has already done that. We just need to have faith in him. (Please note, however, this does not mean good works are bad. Rather, one who has faith in the Lord lives a righteous life. Those good works reflect God's grace living and active in the person. This will become a prominent theme in James' later epistle.)

But Paul does not stop there. Paul echoes, in our reading today, what the Spirit said to Peter: there is no distinction between any of us. We are all in the one living Lord. Paul writes: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live in the Lord; and if we die, we die in the Lord." (Romans 14) You and I exist in relationship to God, to the Living Lord. If Christ has justified and saved us, then we must respond to that free gift of grace, that free act of love by welcoming all people, regardless of their race, identity, or nationality. God's graciousness to us demands that we extend a generous and lavish hospitality to all.

This ought to deeply challenge and unsettle all of us and every Christian. How can we assert Christ's justification and redemption of all while brutally attacking persons of colour? How do acts of violence against women reflect God's generous hospitality to us? How does hate against persons different from us, whether it be religious, ethnicity, nationality or sexuality, show our appreciation for the graciousness and love God has shown to us? I rarely ever say this, but I will say it here with every bit of confidence: racism, sexism, and hate have no place in the Kingdom of God; they are evil acts that stand as an offence to God and his grace to us. Simply put, you can't be Christian and still hate your brother and sister.

Nor can we judge others, that is for God to do, not us. Again, our identity is defined by how we stand in relationship to God, not to each other. It is only God who has the authority to judge. For us to judge others, we measure them by our rules and expectations, not God's ways.

Instead of living the way of judgement and hate, we are called to extend a radical and generous hospitality to all God's beloved people. In our acts of hospitality, we upend the rule of sin over God's people and instead subject all to the law of love. It is not a

coincidence that the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus is bookended by two meals: the Last Supper and the disciples meal with Jesus at Emmaus. In each instance, Jesus draws everyone to himself, even those whose hearts were consumed by anger and hate (Judas), and Jesus expresses a gracious hospitality to those gathered around those tables: he gives of his very body and blood for the life of the world.

By giving of himself to us, Jesus shows us what true hospitality is meant. As we gather each week for the Eucharistic feast and participate once again in Christ's offering of himself at the banquet and cross, we learn what it means to be gracious to **all** God's people: we are to give of ourselves as gift to others just as Christ gives himself as gift to us. We are to do all we can to ensure all can share in the banquet of God's kingdom.

I think this is a good thing to remember as we once again return to our communal celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The past few weeks and months have been a painful time for us. While a few of us continued to celebrate the Eucharist and to livestream it to all, we still felt an emptiness. I sure did. I felt a pain in my heart each time I stood at this altar and looked out onto an empty church. Yet I continued to do so because I knew in my heart that this feast is a gift for the life of the world and we were going to do all we can to share it with others, albeit imperfectly through digital technology.

And we will continue to do everything in our power to share the gift of life with all God's people, no matter how hard that may be.

Shaped and formed by the Eucharist, we will be a church, a people who give themselves as gift to others and extend a lavish hospitality to all. Over the course of the past few months a handful of you have spent countless hours building garden beds and growing, weeding, and harvesting the abundance of God's creation so as to feed God's most vulnerable people with healthy, nutritious food. Your work at the garden was eucharistic; you gave of yourselves to feed others. I want to challenge all of us to not simply be a people who gather around this Eucharistic table for the feast, but a people who are shaped, formed, and empowered by Christ's presence in the Eucharist to go out into the world and extend a gracious hospitality to all through our work in the community. The garden is only the beginning of our eucharistic hospitality. Our eucharistic celebration is meaningless if it doesn't compel us to service.

And all of us can share in the Church's eucharistic mission to serve all God's people, no matter how old or young, weak or strong you may be. All of us can pray for the mission of this parish and ask for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon our ministry. We can even share with friends the good news of what God is doing in our midst through social media and telling neighbours, friends, and family. You can do a lot by telling others about the ministry of Christ Church and inviting them to share in it.

I ask you to prayerfully consider, truly consider, how you may share in our ministry of service to this community. The garden is only the beginning of our work. We have a lot more to do and we can do a lot if all of us come together. And if you are unsure of what you can do, I would be happy to visit with you either by phone or in person and discern with you what God is calling you to do.

My friends, let us not let hate or anger separate us from the love of Christ. Rather, let us extend a generous hospitality to all God's people. Amen.