

Romans 14:1-12
August 14, '11

Roaming Through Romans #7
"A PLEA FROM PAUL"

(Before scripture)

THIS SUMMER WE'VE TAKEN A JOURNEY THROUGH PAUL'S LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN ROME.

THIS WAS – UNLIKE THE OTHER CHURCHES TO WHICH HE WROTE – NOT ONE THAT HE HAD ESTABLISHED, NOR WAS IT EVEN A CHURCH THAT PAUL HAD EVER VISITED.

HE DESPERATELY DESIRED TO GO THERE, THOUGH - IF FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN TO HAVE A STOPPING-OFF POINT ON HIS WAY TO SPAIN, WHICH IS WHERE HE REALLY WANTED TO GO.

AS WE CONSIDER OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING, I CAN'T HELP BUT THINK OF SOMETHING COMEDIAN STEVE MARTIN SAID – *"BEFORE YOU CRITICIZE A MAN, WALK A MILE IN HIS SHOES. THAT WAY, WHEN YOU DO CRITICIZE HIM, YOU'LL BE A MILE AWAY & HAVE HIS SHOES!"*

I DON'T THINK THAT'S REALLY WHAT PAUL HAD IN MIND, BUT I DID THINK OF IT AS I READ THESE WORDS.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING IS THE FIRST 12 VERSES OF THE 14TH CHAPTER OF ROMANS – ROMANS 14:1-12.

(After scripture)

WE'VE HAD A GREAT SERIES IN OUR ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL PROGRAM THIS SUMMER.

EACH SUNDAY, A DIFFERENT TEACHER HAS TAKEN A LOOK AT AN INDIVIDUAL WE FIND IN SCRIPTURE.

WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT THAT INDIVIDUAL'S LIFE & THE STORY OR STORIES ABOUT THEM IN THE BIBLE.

IT'S BEEN A GREAT TIME OF LEARNING & GROWING IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE PEOPLE WHO ARE PART OF GOD'S GREAT DRAMA OF REDEMPTION.

ONE OF THE FASCINATING THINGS THAT HAS BEEN A PART OF VIRTUALLY EVERY CLASS SESSION IS THE WAY IN WHICH THE INDIVIDUALS STUDIED CAN TEACH US SOMETHING ABOUT OUR OWN LIVES.

THEIR EXAMPLE – GOOD OR BAD – CAN TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT OURSELVES.

THAT'S ASTOUNDING.

SOME OF THESE INDIVIDUALS LIVED MORE THAN 3,000 YEARS AGO AND NONE OF THEM LIVED LESS THAN 2,000 YEARS AGO & YET THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT *THEIR* LIVES THAT PERTAINS TO *OURS*.

THAT'S A REMARKABLE ASPECT OF SCRIPTURE.

THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING ASTONISHINGLY RELEVANT TO BE FOUND.

THIS PASSAGE WE'VE JUST READ IS ALMOST FRIGHTENINGLY SO.

IT WOULD BE NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO HEAR OR READ THESE WORDS & NOT REALIZE HOW CLEARLY THEY SPEAK TO OUR OWN DAY & OUR CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS.

I THINK MOST OF US HAVE BEEN SHAKING OUR HEADS IN DISBELIEF RECENTLY OVER THE INABILITY OF OUR NATIONAL LEADERS TO LISTEN TO ONE ANOTHER, TRUST ONE ANOTHER & RESPECT ONE ANOTHER ENOUGH TO FIND SOME COMMON GROUND – SOME WAY OF PUTTING THE GOOD OF THE NATION AHEAD OF PERSONAL INTERESTS.

THAT STATEMENT ITSELF, THOUGH, MAY INCITE CONTENTIOUS FEELINGS & I THINK THAT'S PRECISELY THE POINT PAUL IS MAKING IN THIS PASSAGE – A PASSAGE THAT IS REMARKABLY RELEVANT TO OUR OWN TIME & PLACE IN HISTORY.

THIS IS A PASSAGE THAT REQUIRES A BIT OF BACKGROUND IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND IT & FULLY APPRECIATE IT.

THE SITUATION IN ROME WAS RATHER UNUSUAL.

THE CHURCH WAS INITIALLY MADE UP OF JEWISH CHRISTIANS.

MANY OF THEM, THOUGH, WERE EXILED FOLLOWING A TIME OF CIVIL DISTURBANCE.

THE ROMAN CHURCH WAS THEN MADE UP OF PREDOMINANTLY GENTILE CHRISTIANS.

THE GENTILE CHRISTIANS WEREN'T AS TIED TO THE OLD TESTAMENT LAWS & LEVITICAL RULES AS THE JEWS WERE AND THAT BECAME THE NORM IN THE ROMAN CHURCH.

AFTER THE PERIOD OF EXILE, THE JEWS WERE ALLOWED TO RETURN TO ROME & WHAT THE JEWISH CHRISTIANS DISCOVERED WAS THAT THE RULES & REGULATIONS THAT HAD BEEN FOLLOWED PRIOR TO THEIR DEPARTURE HAD BEEN TREMENDOUSLY RELAXED.

THIS WAS OBVIOUSLY A POINT OF CONTENTION BETWEEN THOSE WHO MAINTAINED STRICT OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW & THOSE WHO DIDN'T.

THIS IS THE SITUATION THAT PAUL IS ADDRESSING IN THESE WORDS.

HE DOESN'T MAKE A DISTINCTION BETWEEN "JEWISH" CHRISTIANS & "GENTILE" CHRISTIANS.

INSTEAD, HE REFERS TO THE "WEAK" & THE "STRONG."

THE WEAK ARE THOSE WHO AREN'T STRONG ENOUGH IN THEIR FAITH TO FULLY BELIEVE WHAT HE HAS SPENT SO MUCH TIME ON IN THIS LETTER – JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH.

SALVATION IS PURELY A GIFT OFFERED BY GOD THROUGH CHRIST.

OUR ADHERENCE TO DIETARY LAWS AREN'T REQUIRED TO RECEIVE THAT SALVATION.

OUR STRICT OBSERVANCE OF HOLY DAYS & EVEN OUR RIGID GUIDELINES PERTAINING TO THE SABBATH AREN'T A PREREQUISITE TO GRACE.

PAUL'S POINT ISN'T TO SINGLE OUT THESE TWO SPECIFIC ISSUES, BUT RATHER TO SET FORTH A PRINCIPLE.

HE IS MAKING A PLEA FOR TRUST, RESPECT, SENSITIVITY & UNDERSTANDING TO BOTH GROUPS OF BELIEVERS.

HE'S CALLING ON THEM TO LISTEN TO ONE ANOTHER.

HE'S CALLING ON THEM TO REFRAIN FROM JUDGING ONE ANOTHER.

AS FREQUENTLY AS THE ISSUE OF JUDGING OTHERS COMES UP IN SCRIPTURE, YOU'D THINK WE'D FINALLY GET THE POINT, WOULDN'T YOU?

JESUS TALKS ABOUT IT.

THE LETTER OF JAMES TALKS ABOUT IT.

PAUL TALKS ABOUT IT ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS IN HIS LETTERS.

WOULDN'T YOU THINK THAT, AT SOME POINT, WE'D FINALLY GET IT?

AND YET IT SEEMS TO BE AS BIG A PROBLEM TODAY AS IT'S EVER BEEN.

IN OUR SINFUL, SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, WE THINK WE'VE GOT IT ALL FIGURED OUT.

I'M RIGHT & YOU'RE WRONG.

A RABBI & A ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST WERE SITTING NEXT TO EACH OTHER AT AN INTER-FAITH EVENT.

WHEN DINNER WAS SERVED, SOMEONE HAD THOUGHTLESSLY PLACED A SLAB OF HAM ON THE RABBI'S PLATE.

HE DIDN'T COMPLAIN BUT JUST ATE EVERYTHING ELSE HE'D BEEN GIVEN, LEAVING THE HAM.

THE PRIEST LEANED OVER & SAID, "*RABBI SIMMONS, YOU & I KNOW THAT THE DIETARY LAWS FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT WERE DEVELOPED AT A TIME WHEN PORK WAS DANGEROUS BECAUSE OF A LACK OF REFRIGERATION & BECAUSE OF SACRIFICES OFFERED TO IDOLS.*

"BUT THOSE DAYS ARE GONE. PORK IS SAFE & THERE'S NO REASON TO CLING TO SUCH OUTMODED PRACTICES. RABBI, PLEASE. WHEN WILL YOU TAKE YOUR FIRST BITE OF PORK?"

THE RABBI LOOKED AT THE PRIEST & SAID, "*AT YOUR WEDDING, FATHER MAGUIRE. AT YOUR WEDDING.*"

MY WAY IS THE RIGHT WAY & IF SOMEONE HAPPENS TO DISAGREE WITH ME – WELL, THEY'RE WRONG.

PAUL DOES SOMETHING VERY INTERESTING HERE, THOUGH.

HE DOESN'T SAY WE SHOULDN'T HOLD ONTO AN OPINION ABOUT SOMETHING.

HE DOESN'T SAY WE SHOULD REVERSE OR EVEN ALTER OUR VIEW ABOUT A PARTICULAR ISSUE.

NO, WHAT HE TELLS THE ROMANS – AND WHAT HE'S TELLING US – IS THAT WE *NEED* THOSE VIEWS, THOSE IDEAS, THOSE CONVICTIONS.

WE SHOULD ADHERE TO THEM VIGOROUSLY BECAUSE, AS A FAITHFUL FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST, THOSE VIEWS, IDEAS & CONVICTIONS HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO US BY GOD.

WE ARE SERVANTS OF GOD AND, THEREFORE, WE ARE TO ADHERE TO WHAT GOD HAS PLACED WITHIN OUR HEARTS.

BUT HERE'S WHERE IT GETS INTERESTING.

HE TELLS US THAT EVEN THOUGH WE HAVE A STRONG IDEA ABOUT SOMETHING, THAT MAY NOT BE HOW GOD HAS SPOKEN TO SOMEONE ELSE.

THAT'S WHY HE INCLUDES THE PART ABOUT EACH INDIVIDUAL ANSWERING TO THEIR MASTER & NO ONE ELSE.

REMEMBER – PAUL IS TALKING TO THE CHRISTIANS IN ROME.

HE'S TALKING TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE GIVEN THEIR LIVES TO JESUS CHRIST.

CHRIST IS THEIR MASTER & THEY ANSWER TO HIM & HIM ALONE.

SOMETHING ELSE THAT'S IMPORTANT HERE HAS TO BE MENTIONED.

PAUL IS TALKING ABOUT NON-ESSENTIAL OR NEGOTIABLE ISSUES AND, OF COURSE, HERE'S WHERE WE RUN INTO A PROBLEM.

WHO'S TO DETERMINE WHAT'S NEGOTIABLE?

PAUL CERTAINLY ISN'T SAYING THAT ANYTHING IS ACCEPTABLE, BUT MY INCLINATION IS TO THINK PAUL'S LIST OF ESSENTIALS OR NON-NEGOTIABLES IS A LOT SHORTER THAN MOST OF OURS!

FOR HIM, SOME THINGS WERE NON-NEGOTIABLE – PRIMARILY WHAT HE TALKED ABOUT THROUGHOUT THE FIRST HALF OF THE LETTER – THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST & HIS FREELY-OFFERED GRACE.

IF WE CENTER OUR LIVES ON CHRIST, WE LIVE IN A CERTAIN WAY.

WE GO BACK TO WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT LAST WEEK – WE DO CERTAIN THINGS & WE LIVE IN A CERTAIN WAY – NOT BECAUSE WE *HAVE TO* – BUT BECAUSE WE WANT TO AS A RESPONSE TO WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE IN OUR LIVES.

PART OF WHAT THAT MEANS IS TRUSTING & RESPECTING OTHERS ENOUGH TO UNDERSTAND WHY THEY BELIEVE AS THEY DO.

IT MEANS TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHO THEY ARE & WHERE THEY'RE COMING FROM.

THERE WAS A MAN WHO WAS SPRAWLED ACROSS THREE ENTIRE SEATS IN A POSH THEATER.

WHEN THE USHER CAME BY & NOTICED THIS, HE WHISPERED TO THE MAN, *"SORRY, SIR, BUT YOU'RE ONLY ALLOWED ONE SEAT."*

THE MAN GROANED BUT DIDN'T BUDGE.

THE USHER, BECOMING IMPATIENT, SAID – A BIT MORE LOUDLY – *"SIR, IF YOU DON'T GET UP FROM THERE, I'M GOING TO HAVE TO CALL MY MANAGER."*

AGAIN, THE MAN JUST GROANED, WHICH INFURIATED THE USHER & HE MARCHED UP THE AISLE IN SEARCH OF HIS MANAGER.

THE TWO OF THEM RETURNED & STOOD OVER THE MAN, TRYING REPEATEDLY TO MOVE HIM, WITHOUT SUCCESS.

THEY FINALLY CALLED THE POLICE & AN OFFICER STOOD OVER THE MAN & SAID, *"ALL RIGHT, BUDDY. WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"*

"SAM," THE MAN MOANED.

"WHERE YA' FROM, SAM?" ASKED THE POLICEMAN.

WITH PAIN IN HIS VOICE, THE MAN REPLIED, *"THE BALCONY."*

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHERE SOMEONE IS COMING FROM TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THEM & WHY THEY DO THE THINGS THEY DO & WHY THEY BELIEVE THE THINGS THEY BELIEVE.

THAT'S WHAT THIS PLEA FROM PAUL IS.

IT'S A PLEA FOR TRUST, RESPECT, UNDERSTANDING & SENSITIVITY.

IT'S A PLEA TO LISTEN TO ONE ANOTHER.

IT'S A PLEA TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY THAT YOU MAY NOT BE RIGHT IN YOUR OPINION AND EVEN IF YOU ARE, THE PERSON WHO DISAGREES WITH YOU MAY NOT BE WRONG!

DO YOU SEE WHY I SAY THAT THIS PASSAGE IS ALMOST FRIGHTENINGLY RELEVANT TO OUR DAY & AGE? ALL TOO OFTEN, WE DON'T KNOW OR BOTHER TO FIND OUT WHAT'S GOING ON IN SOMEONE'S LIFE TO UNDERSTAND THEM & TREAT THEM WITH LOVE, GRACE & SENSITIVITY.

I'VE NEVER HEARD THIS MORE CLEARLY POINTED OUT THAN IN AN EXPERIENCE A MAN HAD IN RIDING A BUS TO WORK ONE DAY.

HE SAID HE GOT ON THE BUS & WAS TRYING TO DO SOME WORK & A MAN GOT ON AT THE NEXT STOP WITH TWO SMALL CHILDREN IN TOW.

THE GUY SAT DOWN NEXT TO THE MAN, BUT THE LITTLE BOY & GIRL JUST RAN UP & DOWN THE AISLES OF THE BUS.

THE MAN TELLING OF THE EXPERIENCE SAID HE COULDN'T BELIEVE THIS MAN NEXT TO HIM WOULD ALLOW HIS CHILDREN TO DO THAT.

THEY WERE YELLING & SCREAMING & FIGHTING WITH ONE ANOTHER AND THEIR FATHER JUST SAT THERE WITH A BLANK LOOK ON HIS FACE, COMPLETELY OBLIVIOUS TO HIS CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR.

THE LONGER THIS WENT ON, THE MORE INCENSED THE MAN BECAME & HE WAS ABOUT TO CHASTISE THIS IRRESPONSIBLE FATHER FOR HIS LACK OF CONTROL OVER HIS CHILDREN.

BEFORE HE SPOKE, THOUGH, THE MAN LOOKED OVER AT HIM & SAID, *"I'M SORRY FOR MY CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR. WE'RE COMING FROM THE HOSPITAL & I'M TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO TELL THEM THEIR MOTHER JUST DIED."*

HOW QUICK WE ARE TO JUDGE SOMEONE ELSE WHEN WE HAVEN'T WALKED IN THEIR SHOES – WHEN WE FAIL TO UNDERSTAND THEM, FAIL TO TRUST THEM, FAIL TO RESPECT THEM.

PAUL'S PLEA IN THIS PASSAGE IS FOR ALL OF THOSE THINGS.

HE CALLS US, AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST, TO UNDERSTAND, TRUST & RESPECT OUR BROTHERS & SISTERS IN FAITH AND TREAT THEM WITH THE SAME LOVE THAT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN THROUGH THE UNMERITED GRACE OF GOD. AMEN.

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