**Getting Along with Gluten-free Vegetarians**

Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13
Romans 14:1-12

 It is one of those birthday cards that you wouldn’t give to just anyone. I am still considering who in fact will be the recipient. The potentially offending part is on the cover. A baker is holding what appears to be a large bunch of bread dough. He has a stern look on as face, as he responds to an inquiring customer, saying “You want something gluten-free? My butt is gluten-free?” Actually he used a word other than butt.

 As far as we know, there are no gluten tensions among the Romans to whom Paul writes his letter. But, in our text this morning, it is quite apparent that a significant amount of tension has developed between the carnivores, those who like a good juicy steak and the vegetarians. You can feel the tension in the air when Paul says, “Some of you believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat meat must not pass judgment on those who abstain, and those who abstain (from meat), must not pass judgment on those who eat.”

 It might sound a bit like Paul is biased toward the meat eaters because he refers to the vegetarians as weak, but it is good to remember it was Paul who also said, “when I am weak, than I am strong.” I would be hesitant to see Paul as one who is taking sides in this conflict. On the contrary Paul is challenging the tendency we all have to let our differences and disagreements become a source of persistent division.

 It is easy to imagine the meat eaters sitting together at fellowship hour with their fellow meat eaters. One meat eater says to the other, “I’ve got a good vegetarian joke for you. *A guy has celery sticking out of one ear, lettuce out of the other, and a zucchini up his nose. He goes to the doctor and asks him what's wrong. The doctor tells him, "Well, for one thing, you're not eating right."* Another guy at the table immediately pops up, here’s a problem I’ll bet vegetarians struggle with, *“Can they eat animal crackers?”*

 Not to be out done the vegetarians gathered at their own table in the fellowship hall, have a couple jokes as well. Turning to the old light bulb joke one of them says, *“How many meat eaters does it take to change a lightbulb?  None, they would rather stay in the dark about things.* Another vegetarian responds, *"The standard diet of a meat-eater is blood, flesh, veins, muscles, tendons, cow secretions, hen periods and bee vomit. And once a year during a certain holiday in November, meat-eaters use the hollowed-out rectum of a dead bird as a pressure cooker for stuffing. And meat-eaters think vegetarians are weird.”*

 If it were only a few good hearted jokes that were being told, Paul would have little reason to be concerned. But, Paul knows that for the Romans these jokes are symptomatic of an underlying tension and conflict that if left unchecked will tear the congregation apart and most importantly will hobble their witness as agents of God’s healing love and justice.

 To us modern 21st century folks it might seem odd that things could get so heated over whether you restrict yourself to such things as green beans, carrots and zucchinis or if you like your vegetable accompanied by a big juicy piece of roast beef. But, as so often is the case, the issue of vegetables versus meat eaters really reflects a deeper, underlying conflict. One of the challenges faced by the early Christian churches, including Rome, was the difference in economic status among the members. The disparity of income in Roman days was even greater than it is today. There was no middle class to speak of.

There are the wealthy that have Roman citizenship and have all the necessary social and political connections. The vast majority, however, range between the sustainable poor, who manage to put food on their tables and the very poor who never know from day to day if they will have enough to eat. The early Christian churches are made up of all those folks. It is the few wealthier Christians who can afford to buy meat.

 The best meat available is the quality meat that has been used as a sacrifice to idols. It can be purchased at a reasonable rate by those with the funds do so. However, if you are poor, you have no choice but to be a vegetarian. The vegetarians know the meat purchased by their wealthier members has been sacrificed to idols and have come to believe that eating this meat is a sin. In the Fellowship Hall, following worship, the division is apparent for all to see, just by where and with whom people choose to sit.

The challenges faced by the people of Rome are, of course, illustrative of the challenges people face in every age, including today. This past week I was among 5 other folks elected by the Presbytery of the Twin City Area to an Administrative Commission charged with taking control of a Presbyterian Church in Eden Prairie that has said we want nothing more to do with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Because of the Presbyterian constitution and governance churches are not free to simply say we are done and walk away. But, that is what this congregation is trying to do. Apparently, a significant part of the conflict and tension stems from recent decisions by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to ordain members who are LGBT. Yet, like with Rome, and the conflict between vegetarians and meat eaters, the conflict with conservative churches about sexual orientation is symptomatic of an even deeper conflict, in this case a conflict over how to interpret the Bible and theology.

The challenges faced by the Church of Rome remain with us today in ways both big and small. Like in Rome we too have a tendency to gather at our separate fellowship hall tables, with like minded folks, who see things our way. This, of course, is a human tendency and not something restricted to the church. A number of years ago author and psychologist Dr. Beverly Tatum wrote a book entitled “Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" Tatum observers, “Walk into any racially mixed high school and you will see black youth seated together in the cafeteria. Of course, it's not just the black kids sitting together-the white, Latino, Asian Pacific, and, in some regions, American Indian youth are clustered in their own groups, too. The same phenomenon she says can be observed in college dining halls, faculty lounges, and corporate cafeterias.”

Paul is keenly aware that \ur ability as communities of faith to communicate the all inclusive love and justice of God, so desperately needed in our world, begins with the community of faith itself. The need is as great today as ever, perhaps greater, for strong healthy, compassionate, life giving communities of faith that can overcome division, rejoicing in our common humanity.

The people of Rome share the same tendency we have of treating those with whom we differ, disagree or have conflict as enemies to be defeated. This past Friday, Michele and I saw a movie entitled “Lawless”, which was based on the true story of a moonshiner and bootlegger family during the time of prohibition. Even though the sale and production of alcohol was illegal, the family income depended on their homemade backwoods distilleries. In the movie a law enforcement officer from Chicago arrives in town to shut down all these illegal distilleries. He is portrayed as a particularly mean and brutal person. The movie, however, shows the humanity of the bootleggers and our sympathies naturally begin to align with the bootleggers. When the mean spirited officer gets his due, it is hard to escape the feeling that he got exactly what he had coming. He had become the enemy and in the process it became difficult to see any humanity in this officer at all.

Left unchecked Paul knows that vegetarians and meat eaters will become each other’s enemies. Left unchecked, those who support the ordination of LGBT members become the enemy of those who offer an unrestricted welcome. Left unchecked, youth and adults who sit at opposite tables based on race will become the enemy of those at other tables.

An alternative to this enemy framed way churches and many others have used to deal with the tension between vegetarians and meat eaters is by trying to suppress any conflict, tension or disagreement. Pretend the differences don’t exist. This is what those of us who are white are doing when we say things like, “I never see color.” It is a short hand way of avoiding the potential conflict that can come from acknowledging very real differences and the unpleasant history behind those differences. Some congregations specialize in conflict avoidance, especially if there is an underlying problem, a deep seated issue that no one really wants to face. It is a lot easier to pretend everything is O.K. and we are all one big happy family than it is to face the disagreement, the conflict.

 It is only in relatively recent years that those who manage forests came to realize that completely suppressing forest fires was counterproductive and in fact made things worse for a potentially even bigger fire. For years fire fighters rushed to completely put out every forest fire that popped up. What eventually happened is that forests became filled with dead wood, just waiting to explode into a firestorm at the next opportunity. Fires, it turns out, have a useful function of keeping damaging forest fires under control and for some plants they are actually essential for their life.

 Paul has no intention of trying to suppress the fire of conflict. Being honest with each other, telling the truth about our experience, has a necessary and useful place in community, in family and frankly among nations. The only way for Israelis and the Palestinians to find lasting peace is by having this type of honest conversation, talking openly and truthfully about those places where they disagree.

 Paul has no interest in suppressing conflict. What Paul does seek is to create communities of faith where there is a safe and supportive space for conflicts, tensions and disagreements to exist, without tearing people a part or causing them to sit at separate tables in the fellowship hall with like minded folks. This is among the reasons that our discussion about the whiteness of our stained glass Jesus has been so important. It would be an easy conversation to avoid, but there is much to be gained in our common witness to the world if we can talk about these things openly and honestly as a community of faith.

 Paul says to the Romans as Paul says to us, our communities of faith have substantial resources in facing our differences at church, in our homes and the wider community. First, Paul reminds us that we are all welcomed by God, meat eaters and vegetarians, as the Psalmist says from the East to the West, from as far as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God’s steadfast love. God’s love is extended to all and no amount of disagreement, conflict or tension can take that love away. Because of this love Paul says, “who are you to pass judgment on one another?” Paul, of course, does not mean we should refrain from critiquing or disagreeing over substantial issues. Paul is saying, refrain from judging a person as unworthy of love. You may recall Pope Francis drew upon this very core belief when he was asked about LGBT members in the Catholic Church, and Francis responded “who am I to judge?”

 Some times our differences are substantial and will need long, hard, caring work to be resolved. But, there other times when a refusal to judge and a measure of humility spoken of by Paul helps us recognize maybe the differences are really not that important and we can simply agree to live and love each other with those differences fully in place.

 It is this with this measure of completely accepting the humanity of one another that Paul proclaims, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord’s.” It is by fully embracing our common humanity revealed in Christ that communities of faith become a gift to the world so desperately in need of healing and wholeness. There may be times when meat eaters get frustrated with the needs of Gluten-free vegetarians. There may be times when Gluten-free, vegetarians get frustrated with meat eaters and their consumption of all things gluten. But, according to Paul, “each of will be accountable to the God of steadfast love.”

**Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist begins as the Psalmist commonly does with praise of God. The God the Psalmist praises is not a God who simply blesses our every action, decision and thought. On the contrary the Psalmist acknowledges we sometimes live in conflict with God’s ways. The Psalmist, however, takes comfort in knowing that God’s final judgment is never one of condemnation, but rather of steadfast love.*

Bless God, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name. Bless God, O my soul, and do not forget all God's benefits — who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. God works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. God made known God's ways to Moses, and God's acts to the people of Israel. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God will not always accuse, nor will God be angry forever. God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love towards those who fear God; as far as the east is from the west, so far God removes our transgressions from us.As a father and mother have compassion for their children, so God has compassion for those who fear God.

**Romans 14:1-12**

*In this letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul is writing to a congregation which is facing serious conflict due to differences over whether it is right to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Paul encourages these Christians to face all conflicts and all differences with the awareness that each of them, all of us, belong to Christ who reveals God’s love.*

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those 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. Who 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.
Some 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. Those 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. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why 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. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.