

Romans 14:1-10

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 judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement 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 honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour 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 judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.

Acts 15:12-21

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago."

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'

This has been the first week in which the Health Authority has seriously relaxed COVID-19 restrictions. Restaurants can operate at greater capacity. Social gatherings are greatly expanded. We can eat together outdoors and sometimes indoors. According to the Health Authority, church going people need not don those pesky masks; we hear a more cautious word from the Church Board on that point and so we remain masked. Just to gauge the emotions of being among an unmasked public, though, I intentionally went into a mall this past week and walked. I took my mask with me and felt compelled to put it on prior to my great adventure. It was disconcerting for me to see a blend of the masked and unmasked. It unnerved me to note not only shoppers, but several till operators, without masks. Perhaps others of us have had a similar experience this past week. I will return to my field trip in a bit for there is deeper reflection on these emotions.

As a continuation of this intro I also want to relate a conversation I had with a church going person on the topic. My walking mate for that hour had been double vaccinated. A brother and his family living out of Province has chosen not to be vaccinated. The family has routinely gathered for mini-reunions in summer. There is tension within the family on how best to proceed this year. They all love each other, but the differences of opinion on vaccination and masks are causing strain. Perhaps there is also some tension among your families and neighbours. How will we be church together given the spectrum of opinion? How do we be family together given the differing perspectives?? Ultimately, how do we be community together?

To set the stage for this line of reflection I want to spend a bit of time with the scripture passages from Acts and Romans which Denelda read. These texts are about potlucks in the early church, which is certainly different than masking or taking a vaccine, and yet there might be nuances of the story which guide us in our life together.

The Apostle Paul finds himself writing to several congregations in Rome that have been struggling with potlucks. The church in Antioch (Acts 13) can't get along when they come together to eat, and neither can the congregations in Rome. The problem with the potlucks is the same, but Romans and Acts give different advice to each group.¹ I will walk through these two situations and offer my take on the application.

The Antioch of Acts 13 was a city north of Damascus along the Mediterranean coast. It became a logical place for missionary activity to begin. On a Sabbath day in Antioch Paul preached a rousing sermon in the synagogue which can be read in full in Acts 13. The key point of his sermon is that God raised Jesus from the dead and that this event demonstrated a new era of forgiveness. The crowd went crazy. Acts 13:43 says

¹ There is wide ranging debate among biblical scholars on the context of these food debates in Acts & Romans. I find Peter Tomson's line of thought most compelling--- Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990), pp 94-95, 236-258.

that many devout Jews and converts followed Paul. People held their lighters and cell phones aloft to encourage more sermonizing. Word spread that there was a hot new preacher in town and lines began forming outside the synagogue. Paul's encore sermon was that salvation was for Gentile as well as Jew, and some gentiles joined the movement. The Jews still outnumber the Gentiles, let's say by 2 to 1, although we are not quite certain of the ratio. Now a group of Gentiles and Jews start meeting together and eating together, and here in lies the problem.

The Jews observed food purity laws while the gentiles had no clue what kosher food was or how to cook it. The weekly potlucks became a sore spot. The Jews grew tired of always finding pork in a number of the casserole dishes; they grew tired of learning that the meat in a stir fry came from a source once offered to idols; gentile cooks were not following kosher guidelines in their cooking. Word got back to Jerusalem about this. The Jerusalem council advised the congregation to avoid meat offered to idols, bloody meat, and meat that had been strangled. The upshot of the decision is that Gentiles can eat many sorts of meat (not just kosher), just take a few precautions.

Romans 14 and 15 also addresses potlucks of the early Christians. The Christians of the Roman church were split into several smaller churches, and like Antioch most of them were a blended configuration of Jew & Gentile.² A major difference between Rome and Antioch, however is that in Rome the Gentiles outnumbered the Jews, let us say 2 to 1 although we don't have precise numbers. Instead of the majority getting fed up, so to speak, with the culinary indiscretions of the Gentiles, the majority in Rome was getting fed up with Jewish pickiness. Paul writes the church and says: "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong to make others fall by what you eat. It is not good to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble". Paul more emphatically states it in 1st Corinthians 8.13 "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall". The upshot of Paul's words here is that we should not eat meat if it bothers another. Do not eat the meat

Potluck problems exist in both Antioch and Rome, and we find different instructions to the different contexts. Why??? Biblical guidance here and elsewhere usually seeks to protect vulnerable people from the tyranny of the majority and exploits of the powerful.³ Church is not about majority votes or power politics. Church is about respecting the other Jesus people beside us and trusting that they will respect us. The weak, the vulnerable, have a place in Christ's church. In Antioch it was deference to a Gentile minority—follow some guidelines, but eat the meat. In Rome it was a deference to the Jewish minority—don't eat the meat. In these two cases the strong (the majority)

² Reta Halteman Finger, *Paul and the Roman house Churches* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

³ "Tyranny of the majority" is a term I learned from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

are advised to sensitivity of the minority. Now we move into case studies. The first of these is, naturally, food.

The idea of being vegetarian is a foreign concept in the place I was raised and the home in which I live. I enjoy my hotdogs, my farmer's sausage, my bacon and other treats of the pig. Yet I have vegan and vegetarian friends. I am not going to label either the omnivores or the herbivores among us as weak. The reality of our 21st century world is that omnivores and herbivores and selective omnivores will be gathering at tables—now that we can again gather at tables. A simple question if hosting people is if there are any dietary restrictions, and this covers a multitude of possibilities. When a guest we do well to clarify our personal needs. In years past I have been grateful to my vegetarian friends who permit me to grill a sausage or hamburger on their coals. And I reciprocate with offering my vegan and vegetarian friends egg plant burgers and tofu when I host. Most of us agree that food choice is a matter of personal conviction rather than a statement of faith, and I suspect that is what our two biblical passages for today was getting at. My second case study has to do with Netflix, video gaming, and the internet.

Adults are strong, and children are weak. Retired army psychologist Dr. David Grossman has given lectures across the United States and published a book with Gloria Degaetano on the effects of violence upon children. They cite studies telling us that children are not able to distinguish between fact and fiction. Children learn to identify with the victim, even when we all bear some culpability for disagreement. Children learn to act out of their victim position with justified violence. Children learn to feel nothing for their enemy. Adults are also subject to this kind of indoctrination often present in films and video games, but children are particularly vulnerable. Most adults are able to critique a movie or video game, but most children do not have the resources to protect themselves.⁴ It is up to the strong then, to exhibit their strength and protect their charges. For some this may mean not watching certain shows or films. For others it may mean watching the shows and then discussing them from a faith perspective. Being conscientious of the vulnerable around us will help us become a stronger faith community. The biblical concerns over meat also inform how we approach vaccinations and masks. This takes us back to my introduction, so you must know we are near the end.

Our masks have unmasked us. Those of us who wear them diligently, as irritating and uncomfortable as they are, telegraph our trust in the medical efficacy and conviction that we are responsible to and for one another. The unmasked and the unvaccinated tell a different story—one around individual freedom, trust in God, an openness to death as a

⁴ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman and Gloria Degaetano, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie & Video Game Violence* (New York: Harmony Books, 2014 (revised)).

natural part of being human. Our masks, and not wearing masks, invite us to share and live with different narratives.

Personally, I will first and foremost defer to my conversation partners. Would you be most comfortable if I wear or do not wear a mask? Are you most comfortable with a hand shake or an elbow bump as we greet each other? I suspect that I will continue to wear my mask in public areas. Why? I want to be sensitive to all those under the age of 12 who have not been eligible to receive vaccination; they are vulnerable. I want to be sensitive to those who have compromised immune systems; they are vulnerable. I want to be sensitive to those who stock shelves and wait tables knowing that some of them are vulnerable. I want to be sensitive to our medical staff; they are overworked and also vulnerable and also have families that are vulnerable. And I want to be respectful of those who have chosen to not get vaccinated for whatever reason—I don't mind dying for people I just do not want to kill someone! I recognize others will not hold the same position as me, and I do not have a problem with that.

In this fraught, painful storm of pandemic and social tensions, we need to practice what the late congressman John Lewis called *public love*; a regard for the humanity of another that wants their well-being so much that we are willing - we are called - to confront our fears, and fragility, so that we might love to death all that robs us of love... It is a love that exposes fear but does so from a place of humility. For this to happen, “the heart has got to open in a fundamental way”.⁵

In conclusion, every Sunday is a potluck in the church. We bring the best we have of ourselves and sometimes that is a bag of potato chips, sometimes greens for the garden and sometimes the tastiest of farmer's sausage. If it is not toxic, let us enjoy and learn from each other. We are here together. Being together makes differences easier. Being together and respectfully nourishing ourselves spiritually, emotionally, and even physically is the way forward for us. Amen

Patrick Preheim, pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Sing: All who love and serve your city - #417 HWB

Benediction: May the Love which overcomes all differences, which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears...be in us and among us now and always.

Amen. #906 VT

Sing: “Bless'd be the tie that binds” #421 HWB

⁵ Debra Dean Murphy, “Our Masks have Unmasked Us”, *The Christian Century* (Nov 4, 2020) p. 35.