

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Children of God: Better Together”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Genesis 27:18-29

Romans 14:1-12

“You’re not folding the towels right.” This was one of the first revelations of our marriage after Cindy and I had walked down the aisle, gone on the honeymoon and driven to seminary. “What do you mean I am not folding the towels correctly? They are folded and hung up.” As far as I was concerned the towels were hung exactly as they should have been. You take one edge fold it over and then hang it up. This is the way I had always hung my towels. It was the way we hung our towels at the house where I grew up. “I know they are hung up,” Cindy said, “But they are not hung up correctly.” At this point I was getting a bit miffed. “So what is the correct way?” “Like this,” she said, as she neatly folded one side of the towel in and then the other side in for a neat, clean look. “There is no right way to fold a towel,” I said. Yes there is, she replied. This morning then, I want to take a poll. How many of you fold your towels in half and hang them? OK, how many of you fold each side in and hang them? (the congregation was split)

Now you understand where Paul found himself in the church at Rome; in the middle of a towel fight. The church had divided itself into camps over two issues. Each side of each issue believed that they were right and the other side was wrong. The first issue was whether or not to eat meat. This had nothing to do with health and everything to do with the fact that all meat in Rome had been sacrificed to idols at temples. One side said that to eat meat was worshipping idols. The other side said that since idols are not real it didn’t matter. The second disagreement was over holy days; namely on which days people ought to worship. Should they follow a Jewish calendar or simply worship on Sunday, the day Jesus was resurrected? Though Jesus did not speak to either of these issues, the people involved knew that they were right and their opponents were wrong. These disagreements were dividing the church.

It would be nice to believe that these were the last disagreements in the church and that everyone lived happily ever after. However we all know, or soon will know, that this is not true. In fact this kind of “I am right and you are wrong...be gone with you” would become a fact of life in the church. About 300 years after this debate the church divided over the divinity of Christ. One side said he was divine, the other said he was not. The church divided. Around the year 1000 one side of the church said all authority belonged to the Pope. The other said all authority belonged to councils of bishops. The church divided east and west. Five hundred years later one group said that salvation is by the sheer grace of God. The other side said no it was by merit. The church divided between Catholic and Protestant. Over the next five hundred years the church divided again and again over issues such as baptism, adult or child; speaking in tongues, yes or no; ordination, men and women, or only men, or persons regardless of their sexual orientation; as well as a host of other matters. And each time both sides claimed to be correct and were more than happy to either leave or cast out those who believed differently. Each side had to be correct.

What fascinates me about all of this is that it is as if no one actually took the time to read what Paul had to say to the church at Rome about their issues. I say this because to sum up Paul first, he says that it is

OK to disagree, to hold different viewpoints on the same issue and stay together. Second, he says that it is not OK to judge others and declare that you are right and they are wrong. And in so doing he offers three reasons that this is so.

First, he says that we have no right to judge those whom God has welcomed into God's party. "*Who are you,*" Paul writes, "*to pass judgment on servants of another?*" In essence he says that if we judge others and declare that they are wrong, it would be like you or I being invited to a party, seeing some other guests that we didn't like and asking them to leave because it is not proper that they should be there. Paul remarks that this action would make us very rude guests. Paul knows the Christians in Rome. He knows that they have all been called and chosen by God. He knows that they all believe in Jesus Christ and that the Spirit is in them. To judge another, he writes, is to judge someone whom God has invited to the table.

Second, he says that they believe what they believe because they believe that it honors God. "*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.*" Paul is making it clear here that there are beliefs and practices that differ, but what matters is the intent behind the belief and practice. If some Christians believe that speaking in tongues honors God, fabulous. If some Christians believe not speaking in tongues honors God, fabulous! He continues by reminding us that we do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves, but to the Lord...meaning we are not the last word on what is right or what is wrong.

Third, Paul tells us that we are not the judge or the jury. "*Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or, 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."*" God is the judge, we are not. I'm not sure if there is a more overlooked and forgotten passage of scripture than this one. As Christians we have spent two thousand years pretending that we get to judge and God merely signs off on our judgments, because after all we are right and they, whoever they are, are wrong. Paul wants us to remember that ultimately we will all stand before God and have to account for our judgments and our choices.

What is so interesting about us as Presbyterians is that we have split about as many times as any denomination can split, even though we supposedly agree with Paul. How so? It is so because within our tradition we acknowledge that we will never have perfect beliefs or perfect practices. We acknowledge that every confession and every council will make mistakes. All we can do is try to be the best we can as imperfect children of God and followers of Jesus Christ. Let me be clear that this does not mean that we do not set out what we believe, for we do. We have a great history of striving to understand the will of God as best we can, so we can be the best Christ followers that we can be. At the same time though, we know these beliefs and practices are proximate and not perfect. For many of us in an anxiety ridden world, in which there is an ever increasing desire for absolute truth and absolute certainty, it can be a difficult to believe that we do not know exactly what is the truth about every doctrine and practice. Yet Paul reminds us that this is OK. It is OK to hold two very different sets of beliefs over issues even though some consider one or the other to be essential. But he does so because he believes that the church is better together rather than split apart. For if Christ is one, why ought we to be more than one? The challenge then for us is to be open to hearing what those on the other side of issues have to say. The challenge is to be open to the possibility that each side may be right and be open to the possibility that God may be opening our eyes to new possibilities of being the

church. My challenge for you this week then is to ask, “How am I being open to the new things that God might be doing in the world, in the church and in my life?”