

Sermon Text for May 6, 2018

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Genesis 7:6-16, Romans 14:1-6

“living with animals”

We heard last week the utter joy we have as Christians when we give our lives over to Christ and try not to be the one who pulls the chord and guides the parachute in. If it feels good in Christ, then we ought to do it because we have complete confidence in the one who holds our future in his hands. Today we hear Paul temper that message just a bit because he realizes that we are all different and we all like different things.

In fact, what I like may not only be something that you don't like but it may actually offend you. What you like I may think is a waste of time and not what God ultimately has in mind for us. Paul today takes our understanding of Christian freedom and puts limits on it using the term weak or immature and mature. Let me give you an example, we'll use Noah's ark as an example. This half cows, this half sheep, this half dogs, this half cats.

Each one of you loves your voice and who you are and are proud of it and think it is the only way to be. The others you think don't know what they are doing, they're wrong. It is a mess, imagine Noah what he felt like. Being a part of a community can feel a lot like living with animals, because so often our understanding of who we are in Christ is used as a measuring stick, or a club to be used against others. We try to force people to be who they are not, namely us, and when they don't conform we think they are animals.

Christ calls us today to live freely, if it feels good do it, but don't look down on those who haven't discovered that yet, or don't judge those who actually enjoy their life in Christ.

READ SCRIPTURE

This Scripture has resolved a decades long debate within the Bronkema house. The debate has been about Tofu, how many are you fans of Tofu? You are nuts. In my family for years Tofu, let's call it a vegetable, has been put up to the heights of meat like pork chops, steak, hamburger. I was told you can fry it, you can bake it or you can eat it raw out of the refrigerator. My kids were trained since elementary school to actually like

Tofu. They used to bring it to their lunch to school, this was when we were in Florida, in the South. Let me tell you, if you don't like tofu, in the South, it is basically outlawed.

Finally, the 14th chapter of Romans verse 2 comes along and resolves the debate once and for all. The weak eat only vegetables, those who are strong eat meat. I am a meat and potatoes type guy, so we have been vindicated.

What is Paul talking about anyway? It isn't a culinary statement or a slam against vegetarians who may have been threatening his way of life. Let's figure this out. Remember the meat that we get at the supermarkets is packaged and processed. In Paul's day people got meat in the cities primarily from the sacrifices that were taking place to pagan Gods. Some people within the Christian church refused to eat that meat because it came from a context where people were worshipping something other than the true God. Paul has said elsewhere basically, don't sweat it. The meat itself is not bad, in fact it's pretty good. But some people could not get past the whole sacrifice to a foreign god thing and refused to eat that meat.

Paul in these verses calls these people weak in the sense that they were immature Christians because they were not able to live in the freedom of Christ that we talked about last week. In the Greek this term weak means literally immature or helpless. You know what Paul is talking about. There are some who take a certain comfort in hearing and knowing the rules and following them to the letter.

Those who are weak have a hard time stepping out of the plane because there is a possibility that what they are doing is going over the line. Their faith is tied up strictly in following the rules. There is no dynamic relationship where Christ challenges you to step out of the boat in the midst of the storm. For many people life is black and white. There is a right way and there is a wrong way. Paul says, well, not really when you are living in a community, there is a lot of grey. When you are living with other animals, well, flexibility is key. What is that statement that is attributed to Luther, but really was not him who said it: in the essentials unity in the non-essentials liberty.

For the weak there is no understanding that there are different ways to respond to God's grace. Paul begins this chapter by saying welcome those people in to your church, but not just to prove to them that you are right. I know out of the 100+ people we have received into membership over these past 7+ years a vast majority of you come from traditions where the rules were all that mattered. Most of you stayed, but there are some

who felt lost, abandoned without the rules to cling to and define who they were. In fact, some may have felt that they were living with animals. When you come from a background where the rules are spelled out for you and you are plopped into a context where life is about freedom and trying to understand how God's desire for you might be different from God's desire for me, it can be disorienting.

Paul has two messages in these verses for us today, because he is addressing two different groups. For those who are weak, grow up, live in the freedom and joy that Christ wants you to live in. If you are not able to get over certain things then accept that for your way of life but don't make anyone conform to who you are, because it may not be the best way for that other person. The second word he has is for those who have no problem living within the culture and knowing where the line is drawn and not crossing that line. In I Corinthians 9:22 Paul states I became weak for the sake of those who are weak.

In this conservative community there are a number of very serious no-no's that you are not to do. One of them deals primarily with alcohol. In this community we have a very serious problem with our children drinking way too much and that is because our adults have a problem with drinking way too much. Because of this problem there is a general consensus that alcohol is evil.

When I am out in public in mixed company you will almost always see me drinking a coke. If I am with the young couples group I might drink a glass of wine, or if I'm with Leo I might drink a beer. For some here that may be scandalous because there is an unwritten rule in this culture, nowhere in the Scripture, but in this culture that because alcohol is badly abused it is evil. For those to whom it is a scandal when I am at your house I will drink my coke and eat my tofu and vegetables as Paul says. I can become anything depending on whom I'm with. On the golf course I will drink coke for the same reason that in my fraternity I only drank coke. Because there are some who are scandalized by a Christian or a pastor who drinks alcohol. We live in that type of society and there is a part of me like Paul who wants to say grow up.

Stop being so weak and immature to not recognize that if you have a problem then you should not be involved in anything that is going to take away from you giving glory from God, but don't make your problem everyone else's problem. That is what Paul is saying because Rome more than any other city the Christians had to deal with

daily sacrifices and decisions on how far could they cross the line to be in the culture but not of it. Paul here tells us that usually those who were weak considered those whom it did not bother to be animals and they didn't want to associate, much less live with animals.

We have enough to worry about without planning the minute details of other peoples' lives. But Paul puts it all in perspective in the last verse, when he states that all that we do, eat or not, drink or not, we ought to do it in the honor of the Lord. Why do we drink? Is it in line with what God would want us to do? Why do we refuse? Is it because we don't think God would approve and it is sinful?

Paul refuses to take sides here. Both sides think that they are living with animals. But you know, if God can accept people and their faults, so can you. God says we are going to be perfect in God's eyes. Think of the person next you as the one who like you is going to be presented faultless and blameless before the throne.

It is not anything goes, do not be deceived, look at Romans 1. But know that the animals that you see around you make up the occupants of the boat in which we are all shut in. If we appreciate the cows and let them moo, the cats and let them meow, the dogs and let them bark, the sheep and let them baa, we will find ourselves every day growing in our faith. And after a while this noisy din, will become a wonderful symphony of a family of God trying to live their lives for Jesus Christ.

Amen.