

"I Think I'll Pass." Ex. 14:19-31; Ex. 15:1-11, 20-21; Romans 14:1-12
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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Well, here we go again! It's like we've been on a raft, lulled into thinking that we were just slowly drifting along when, all of a sudden, the pace quickened and we heard that distant rumble that tells us the river is narrowing and there are rapids ahead and we've got to pay attention!

Now we are back once more to our fall schedule with all that it has to offer. I hope you will take advantage of the new study options and the fellowship opportunities we will have.

As we come together it is like a family. That image was brought home to me in many ways last Tuesday when the Session met with the Confirmation Class and also when we met with the new members. Everyone talked about what Chapel Lane means to them and the importance and value we place on knowing one another, welcoming all and hoping there is a place for everyone here.

The church family isn't all that different from any other family. Like other households there are traditions and habits, rules and conventions. Often these remain unspoken and we just have to figure them out. Sometimes they are so deeply ingrained that someone who has grown up with them doesn't even think there's a need to talk about them.

They'll say: "You know, I never really thought about it... It's just the way it is... We've always done it this way."

Household rules create a sense of order and stability. They can contribute to peace and harmony. If no one eats at the dinner table until all are seated and grace has been said, it creates a certain atmosphere. If the first person to take a shower knows to go easy on the hot water, it helps the last person avoid a shocking experience.

But household rules and convictions can also become the basis for passing judgment on others and for setting ourselves apart. And that is when they cease to be helpful because they undermine hospitality and welcome.

This is not to say there are no rules here at Chapel Lane, or that there aren't certain expectations, but we try to keep the list rather short and the grace rather long as we go about the important work of building community and expanding our hospitality.

As the household of God, the church is a composite of many different households with many different patterns of behavior and many different styles. Finding a way to have a sense of order and stability without becoming legalistic and judgmental or getting into win/lose battles is always a challenging balancing act. And it has been this way since the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ.

Look at Paul's letter to the Romans. It's almost as if he has been asked to arbitrate between different "household rules", different styles of table fellowship and worship practices. It's as though they've asked: "Paul, is it ok to eat meat that was sacrificed to a Roman god? Some folks do. Some don't. What should we do at the church potluck today? And, since we're not in Jerusalem anymore and since we might lose our jobs (not to mention our heads) if we don't go along with observing certain pagan festival days, is it ok to worship at different times and places?"

Was it their expectation that Paul would issue a "ruling"? He's often been seen as the "bad cop" of the New Testament, but isn't it interesting how he responds. He pushes for grace over rules and asks all to remember whose people they are.

We are God's people. We are all former slaves now set free in Christ. We are all gathered into one family, one household of faith. We are all called to set aside judgmental attitudes in favor of practicing radical hospitality as we extend Christ's welcome to all.

Paul makes the case that we are called to do this because none of us is in charge. God alone is in charge and all those who have gathered in the company of the church are there because God has laid claim to them. God has claimed each of us and we are living as those who do not live just to ourselves, but to God. Therefore, Paul says, remember that you are servants of God and therefore servants of one another.

When we are gracious, when we seek to do all things in love and for the glory of God, each striving to honor the Lord in our daily living, then how is it possible for a church - any church - not to work things out and blossom and grow?

Welcome is the watchword of Christian community and it takes practice. And it is so important.

We constantly have to guard against making our personal convictions the measure of all convictions or our devotion and piety the yardstick by which everyone's devotion and piety are measured, or our traditions the only traditions that are faithful to God.

To do otherwise is to head down a dangerous, judgmental, legalistic road that takes us away from God's grace and moves us toward self-righteousness, quarreling and contentiousness. When we are on that road we insist that we are right and others are wrong. Then we build walls of separation rather than broad communities of understanding, mutual respect and love.

Paul didn't want the early church to go down that judgmental road. He didn't want their desire for uniformity to destroy their unity in Christ. Why would the church in any day and age want to go there?

It's a path that leads to destruction. Taken to the extreme, saying "my way is the only way" is the path of religious extremists. It's a path that leaves rubble in its wake and families mourning the loss of loved ones who died for no good reason other than the fact that someone was more in love with power and passing judgment than with finding a path of peace and mutual understanding.

As followers of Jesus and as part of his body in the world we have a tremendous opportunity to practice our holy calling to be peace makers and to "pass" when the occasion comes to be pass judgment on someone else. The way we choose to live together as this gathered community, practicing hospitality and extending grace and welcome has a ripple effect that can make a huge difference in every aspect of our lives.

It starts right here, right now, in this place with the way we treat one another - brothers and sisters in the same household, seeking to love and serve the same Lord.

Last week we sang "They will know we are Christians by our love". Each and every day we have decisions to make about whether or not those words are true. Will we be known by our mutual love or by our

judgmental rules? By our hospitality or by the number of people we send to the hospital? By being in charge or by letting Christ be in charge of everything?

Let us pray.