

**Pentecost 15A, Proper 19. Romans 14:1-12; Matt. 18:21-35.
September 14, 2020.**

Tolerance is one of those words that, in our common usage, does more to make us *feel* good than it does to make us *be* good. It is right, sure, of course we should be tolerant. But once we start thinking about the work this word does in our lives, we may find that it actually isn't that much. We may even find that it's often empty and can pretty easily become a tool for some more insidious ideology, like consumerism. We tend to become tolerant by deciding that things that don't affect us don't matter very much. Even that is pretty good when we imagine the opposite, intolerance, which quickly pushes us to punish and oppress. But while tolerance thankfully dampens cruelty, by itself it doesn't do much to foster relationships. The cruelty of intolerance is incompatible with love, but tolerance alone does not take us anywhere near the love and care we hope for. And tolerance alone cannot be the basis of a community, precisely because it pertains mostly to those things that don't matter much.

Paul is working with the role of tolerance in a Christian community in today's selection from Romans. Some of this language is a little coded, which can obscure what is going on. Paul is being very delicate, but the issues at stake here are kosher eating and observance of the Sabbath. In an inversion that we still need to hear, it is the spiritually weak who need the guardrails of religious rules. The spiritually strong are fine moving beyond these reminders of the structure of a religious life. And Paul is trying to smooth out the communal wrinkles caused by different approaches to spiritual practice.

He is arguing for tolerance, but crucially, it is tolerance in things that he doesn't really think matter very much. These folks need dietary rules and a set calendar as part of their relationship with God? That's fine, as long as they don't judge the people who don't. Those folks don't find any resonance with dietary rules and special days? That's cool, as long as they don't despise those who find these observances useful to keep them on track. We know that Paul is fully convinced that Christians do not need to observe kosher or follow strict customs about the Sabbath. But here, two things matter much more than these specifics: the harmony of the community and that whatever rule of life we follow, we do so in honor of the Lord.

Living or dying to the Lord, giving our lives or deaths for God, suggests that we shouldn't use Paul's call to tolerance to reach too quickly for a saccharine calm. It is always tempting, for those of us who have some security from immediate threat, to appeal for peace and say, Hey, let's stop quarreling over opinions and just be nice to each other. But in the midst of chiding us for quarreling over opinions, Paul reminds us what we are giving our lives to—and it's not the status quo.

However we do it, we are giving our lives to the one who fed the hungry, healed the sick, sought out the lonely, and kept speaking the truth to the powerful until they killed him for it. The one who pronounced blessing on the poor, the meek, the merciful, mourners, the pure in heart, peacemakers, and the persecuted. We can't follow this Lord while being content with the status

quo, until the status quo is the kingdom of God. We can't live or die to this Lord by telling the hungry, the sick, and the persecuted that their needs are opinions not to be quarreled over.

And so the question that this passage really presses upon us today is how to discern how to draw the line between quarreling over opinions and standing for our convictions. I'm afraid that there is no visible line between what is crucial and what is contingent. There is no fool-proof way to be sure that we are extending tolerance to the peripheral, but holding firm for the central, in the church or in the world. But this passage calls us to pay very close attention to what is an opinion and what is a conviction. To stand firm for our convictions, and not to mistake opinions for convictions.

We will make mistakes, which is part of why it is so important that, as we learn in today's gospel reading, our common life is made of forgiveness. We have been forgiven for so much, and we are called to forgive and forgive and forgive. Being forgiven means that we don't have to be perfect. And if we don't have to be perfect, then we can have the courage to make decisions, to hold fast to our convictions, to extend a tolerance that might allow us to grow towards love. We live and die to the Lord, who upholds us and will make us stand in truth and love. Amen.