

Alive in Christ: Alive Together!

A sermon based on Romans 14:1-9.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

With my alb off. Yep, here I am. Your eyes are not deceiving you. This is me without my alb on. Not standing behind the pulpit. What do you think? Maybe a dangerous question to ask. I saw the looks when I walked out of the sacristy...the “what is going on here? Are you feeling ok, Pastor” look. I’m not surprised. This is definitely not the norm here.

But, is this ok? Think about that. Is this ok? Not, is this your preference? There’s a difference there, right?

You know, my preference – it may be yours too - is the alb, something plain to hopefully keep you focused on what’s coming out of my mouth, not what novelty tie Pastor is wearing this week (though I tend to stay away from those). And standing behind the pulpit, that’s more of a comfort thing; there, I don’t fall into the temptation of walking/wandering around aimlessly, giving your necks a workout....or always having to have something for my hands to do, though I think I could get away with this.

But again, is this ok?

That’s the question the Apostle Paul, with these verses from Romans 14, wanted the believers in Rome, and us, to wrestle with...is this ok? Here’s the situation. The congregation in Rome was made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Jews, as you can probably guess, were more in tune with Scripture, especially the Old Testament laws and regulations, rituals, ceremonies, while the Gentiles, they were, what we would call, newer to the faith. So, in one body, you had different backgrounds, different levels of spiritual maturity, and different approaches to areas of adiaphora.

Have you ever heard that word, adiaphora? It’s what Paul’s talking about here as he encourages, **“Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.”** These disputable matters would fall under the category of adiaphora. Adiaphora refers to something God neither commands nor forbids. In other words, you have a situation, a matter, where two parties may legitimately hold a difference of opinion, and neither would be wrong. It’s an area of Christian freedom.

Paul mentions two specific cases of adiaphora here. First, food. If you know anything about the Jews, they have all these dietary restrictions, which harken back to Old Testament regulations, where God restricted what they could eat. A big one for us today, no pork. And the second area of adiaphora? Sacred days. Again, the Jews, they had all these festivals and special days God commanded in the Old Testament; they held these as sacred and celebrated them.

Now, these dietary restrictions and sacred days, at the time of Paul’s writing, they were no longer in effect, not even for the Jews. Jesus came as the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus established a new covenant. Jesus came and kept all those Old Testament ceremonial regulations perfectly; they were no longer required...not that they couldn’t be observed; they just weren’t required.

Now, even though the Christian Jews knew and understood this - the full spiritual implications of this new covenant, changing their mindset, like especially for their eating habits, wasn't so easy. Making the change took some time.

The Gentiles, on the other hand, had never been under those ceremonial laws. They had been eating pork all along, but for them now to do that in the presence of the Jewish Christians or even to put pressure on Jews to join them in a meal including "unclean" foods would have strained their congregational ties.

Oddly enough, in cases such as these, the Gentiles, comfortably making full use of Christian liberty by eating anything and everything, were in a manner of speaking more mature than the Jewish Christians who still had their reservations. So the Gentile were the strong brothers who needed to be considerate of their weaker brothers and sisters.

Now, with those two groups coming together, there was potential for either of two problems. The strong Gentile, cheerfully eating anything, could easily look down on the hesitant Jew as being something of a spiritual wimp. The Jew, on the other hand, could look disapprovingly at the Gentile who heedlessly helps himself to everything on the menu, and complain, "He shouldn't be doing that! Eating ceremonially approved foods is more God-pleasing than partaking of those other, "unkosher" things."

Maybe that doesn't seem like that big of a deal to us today. "Why not just eat what they want at home." But what you have to understand is in the early Christian church, eating was a larger part of the congregational life – the communion service typically followed a fellowship meal. So this was a big deal.

Maybe try this on for size. You walk into a bar, you see a fellow member sitting at the bar, knocking back a tall, cold one with some fellow co-workers, laughing, having a good time. Maybe he even had another one. What would you think?

Or, you're driving past the bar one evening, and you just happen to see a member walking into the bar wearing clothing that looks a little too tight or is maybe showing a more skin than what you'd wear. What would you think?

You see a younger family from church at the grocery store. One of the kids is getting a little rowdy, everyone's watching, Dad gives him a firm smack on the backside. What would you think?

You're talking to a member after worship, they mention they're headed to the Bahamas in a few weeks, but wait, weren't they there last year? What would you think?

Another member invites you to see a movie with them, but it's R-rated, there will be violence, strong language, sexual content. What would you think?

Here at church, we're singing a new song, and I announce it's going to be accompanied by electric guitar and drums. What would you think?

Paul says, ***"Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters."***

Without passing judgment on disputable matters. Do you understand? He's not saying never pass judgment. I think that's one of the great misunderstandings we have..."I'm not allowed to judge anyone. That would be sinful." There are places throughout Scripture where God calls on us, who are spiritually mature, to judge sin...to call sin "sin."

But this isn't that. Every one of those instances...adiaphora – an area of Christian freedom. But who here hasn't pass judgment, thought, "That man shouldn't be at the bar, getting drunk." "If I were her father/mother, she wouldn't be allowed out of the house wearing that." "I would never think to hit my child." "If I knew my church was falling behind in our offerings, I wouldn't dare think about flaunting my money by going on so many vacations." "I can't believe that person would knowingly and willingly go watch that filth." "Those instruments have no place in this church."

Even going back to this (walking around and not wearing the alb)...do you know this is becoming more normal throughout the synod? But I remember Professor Tiefel's worship class at the Sem, how he was adamant about wearing black slacks, black shoes, white button-up shirt under the alb every Sunday. And I'll be honest, I see videos of guys walking around with plaid shirts, no tie, jeans, so casual, and I've thought, "What are you thinking?!? That's not what we were taught. You're just trying to be all hip and cool," as if they're in the wrong, when they're not. That's what the Jews were doing. Looking at the Gentile Christians in an area of Christian freedom and then binding their consciences by saying, "What you're doing is deplorable." That's not right.

And then, there's the flipside. "Oh, you struggle with seeing how alcohol consumption can be done in a godly way. Here, hold my wine glass while I pop open this beer and chug it in your face." "You're not comfortable with what I'm wearing. That's your own problem; deal with it." "You're uncomfortable with how I discipline my kid; then look the other way." "Next time I want to see an R-rated movie, I'll invite you along and not tell you what it is ahead of time." "You don't like the guitar and drums? Maybe we should sell the organ, change up the altar area and put a full praise band here front and center." All of that, not caring about what spiritual struggles another believer might be having with those situations...again, areas of Christian freedom. That's what the Gentiles were doing, being more spiritually mature, but flaunting that freedom in the Jews' faces, saying, "This is fine; you deal with it." That's not right!

Do you see what those attitudes do? They get in the way. They stunt growth. They cause divisions. They open the door for us to unfairly pass judgment in areas where it's not ours to pass. And every one of us is guilty. I most certainly am.

And what does God's Word say? ***"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master servants stand or falls."*** Later on, in verse 12, Paul writes, ***"Each of us will give an account of himself to God."*** As believers, we are God's servants. We will all ultimately have to answer to him. He's the one who makes the final judgment. And I don't even need you passing judgment on me in areas of Christian freedom to know what my standing before God should be...and vice versa.

"To their own master servants stand or falls," Paul says. And he continues, ***"They will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand."*** That's the verdict. For the lack of love we've had, for the disunity we've promoted with our unfair and unloving judgments, this is God's verdict...we stand. We are not cast out of his presence. We are not cast down to hell. We stand.

And it's because of Christ. Paul writes, ***"For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living."***

This is what we've been hearing again and again these past weeks. We all are in this relationship with Christ, where now we live and die to him...to serve him in thanks for what's been done...how he "died and returned to life."

We might not always get along. In our gospel, Jesus tells us, **"Love each other,"** but we don't always do that. We definitely haven't always gotten along with God or shown love to him, and that's on us. And yet we still stand, because **"greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."** True love was Jesus not only living a perfect life, living in harmony with others...true love was Jesus dying and coming back to life to restore the relationship between us and God...to reconcile us. And he did, so now we stand. With Jesus' resurrection, our Master's final verdict is, we will stand (all of us together) with him forever in heaven.

We will stand, all of us together...as we stand, all of us together right now. Let's not forget that. Often, it's too easy to let "me" get in the way of "us." Sometimes, my preferences start to become what I view as right and wrong, as in, "is this what I would do?"

No more. Instead, it's "is this bringing glory to God?" Paul writes, **"Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God."**

If I walk around like this without the alb on, am I giving glory to God? The parent who spansks their child as a form of loving discipline, does that bring glory to God? Can I have a beer and be drinking to the glory of God?

You see, if Christians handle adiaphora, or "indifferent matters," as they should, then every thought will focus on glorifying God. When this happens, no thought of self-righteous superiority will enter the minds of either the weak one or the strong.

We'll see how with our freedom, there comes responsibility. Our Christian freedom must be normed by love for our neighbor. I am certainly free to eat or drink, but my eating and drinking doesn't happen in a vacuum. My Christian freedom is not freedom to enslave a weaker brother or sister's conscience. We are bound to this family of believers – our family - because we both belong to Christ. And so we want to, we will make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Restricting my freedom out of love for my brother is service to Christ that pleases God and brings righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Now, doing that, it takes work. It takes love, care, concern. But we're willing to do that because we're in this together! Have you heard of the Spartan Race? It's ever-changing, but it's basically a series of obstacle races, where a team will run a certain distance, having to complete these physical obstacles along the way. The team either finishes together or fails together. So, they're constantly working as a team to make sure every teammate can make it through, over, under each obstacle.

That's us. We have different backgrounds, different preferences, different levels of spiritual maturity. But alive in Christ, we're bound together by love. And so, we'll live and work and serve together, even through the struggles, in love...to show our thanks to God...to give glory to him. And that's right! Amen.