

Sunday, September 14, 2014: Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Church folks will not always agree—nor should we.

by [Joann H. Lee](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue

The first fistfight I ever witnessed was in a church. An argument between two leaders escalated into a physical fight. This sort of physical outburst may be unusual, but it seems churchpeople have always had differences of opinion. There's something comforting about this long history: despite the church's divisions and internal turmoil, it continues to be a community of and for the faithful.

In Paul's time, what you chose to eat or not eat could be quite controversial. Food still takes a primary role in our lives together as God's church, but these days it usually brings us together more than it divides us. In its place, we have plenty of other things

that threaten to divide us instead. One thing I love about my Presbyterian tradition is that we discuss, debate, and vote on issues that have passionate supporters on both sides. Rather than running from conflict, we openly share our different points of view.

At our best, we are respectful listeners who love and honor our sisters and brothers with whom we disagree. We uphold our differences and recognize that diversity is one of our strengths. At our worst, we despise one another and pass judgment. We threaten to break our ties and retreat into our own homogenous factions.

I believe that one of the gifts the church can offer the world is an ability to be united without being uniform. Our capacity to accept without requiring assimilation—to stand in solidarity without being the same—bears witness to God's transcending love and all-encompassing welcome. What we eat, whom we ordain, whom we marry, where we invest or divest our money—these are not the greatest threats to our church. The greatest threat is the myth that we cannot be one if we are not the same.

In Romans, Paul warns against such judgment and derision that lead to brokenness and division. He asserts that there will be differences of opinion; he is not surprised to learn that this is so. He declines to choose one side and declare it right. Instead, he reminds the church in Rome of those things that are central to the faith—and in so doing, he makes clear that these other disagreements are peripheral.

In seminary, we talked about the difference between a boundaried faith and a centered faith. A boundaried faith contains a detailed list of rules and laws that set up a defined line between in and out. This kind of faith secures the walls against anyone who might breach them with improper behavior or unfit conduct. A centered faith, on the other hand, holds only to a few central tenets of the faith, allowing space for difference on all other matters. This kind of faith is fluid and flexible. It is permissive so long as the main truths are upheld.

Paul seems to advocate here for a more centered faith. And his words remind Christians today of two of our faith's founding principles. In life and in death, we belong to God. And God has welcomed even those with whom we disagree. These two truths lie at the heart of our faith.

Maya Angelou says it like this: "While I know myself as a creation of God, I am also obligated to realize and remember that everyone else and everything else are also God's creation." The first truth secures our own selves in who we are, reminding us that we are the Lord's. The second challenges us to include others in that promise.

Living in community is hard. It asks us to value right relationships over being right. It requires mutual forbearance, empathy, and humility. And inevitably it requires the ability to forgive.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is asked, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus' reply: no, 77 times. We are expected not only to forgive but to forgive repeatedly. This isn't easy, but it is how a community is held together. The parable that follows reminds us that we forgive repeatedly because we have first been forgiven, also repeatedly.

Church folks will not always agree. And we should disagree; it's dangerous to have a church of only like-minded people. But because we disagree—and because we often hurt one another in our disagreements—we must also learn to forgive.

“The church is dying,” people say. But difference doesn’t threaten our existence; division does. A Fred Pratt Green hymn we often sing not only recognizes the church’s death but looks beyond it: “The church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.”

We are a people forged together by resurrection. Jesus Christ, the only head of the church, calls us together as one and unites us. It is not God’s intention that our differences would bring division, but that through our differences, we would have a fuller expression and understanding of God.