

“Eating a Balanced Diet of Faith and Love”

Romans 14: 1-23

As many of you know, I went home to North Carolina this past week and while I was there, I had the most fascinating conversation with a friend. One of Mom and Dad’s neighbor is a rabbi at a local synagogue and usually when I come home, we talk theology and this time was no different.

For this theological conversation, we found ourselves sitting at a table in my home church’s fellowship hall, surrounded by food. Of course, what better place to have a conversation about God than at a table surrounded by food!

Now, I should know by this point that our theological conversations never start out simple, like how’s church going or how’s life. No, usually our conversations start out by tackling the BIG topics and once again, this time was no different. My rabbi friend started this theological conversation with the question: “What’s the purpose and point of theology?”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with this question, especially since my profession is based on doing theology in practical ways. So I shared that traditionally theology has been the study of God but recently I have come to wonder if theology is something more than the traditional sense. I have come to

wonder if by asking our questions about God, about the universe, about faith, about life, if we are not trying to discover God, not necessarily because we are looking for answers to our questions but because we want to be connected to something beyond ourselves.

To which my rabbi friend replied, “The first rule of Kabbalah is that if one comes to faith seeking answers, one is practicing faith for the wrong reasons.” He followed up this comment by sharing that he had just finished a book written by the Dali Lama and if there was one religion that he would leave Judaism, it would be for Buddhism.

To which I replied, I do like how Buddhism calls us to work on ourselves but at some point, we need to realize that we were not created to be alone. This lead to a discussion about God creating humankind, which lead to a conversation about Jesus not coming to earth to start a new religion which lead to a conversation about Jewish dietary laws which was ultimately rounded out with a nod to Neil DeGrasse Tyson and his new show “Cosmos”.

I’m sure any outsider listening to our conversation would have had trouble following our train of thinking and would have just shouted at us to please pick one topic and stick with it!

And I guess I could see that person's point but I would argue that we did stick to one topic. We were discussing the many ways that God has touched our lives and has enriched our faith. I think we both realized that although we are a part of a particular religious tradition, we know that our God is constantly working in so many different ways to reach out to us and connect to us as God's people. I think we both realized that although we have found something to feed our souls in our particular tradition, that no one singular religious institution or tradition has all the answers or is the only way to reach and connect with God. I think we would both argue that our God is much bigger than that.

And as I reflected on this week's Scripture, I believe that Paul is saying the same thing. In this text, Paul is writing to the church in Rome who is struggling with certain faith issues, specifically issues surrounding the table and what are the correct eating practices one should practice when the community gathers at the Lord's table.

And Paul sums the solution to their problem this way: If it feeds our souls, then it is correct. If it connects us with God, then it is correct. If it reminds us that God is holy, then it is correct.

Ultimately, as people of faith, we are called to focus our attention on our relationship with God, making it stronger, and trying to become the person that

God calls us to be. That's the faith we are called to practice as the people of God. We are called to cultivate our relationship with God in and through everything we do and say.

But, there is always a but! Faith may establish a new life for us as individuals but the Love of God should be what always determine it. The Love of God should always be what leads us and guides as people of faith.

Paul goes on in this text to say, just because we have been set free by Christ, does not mean that we are an anything goes type of faith. We do have some standards. And the main standard that should guide all of our decisions and interactions is the love and grace of God. Our innermost beliefs may be right for us as individuals but our outward actions as people of God must always, always, always be done out of love for one another, that same love that God has shown each and every one of us.

Or let me say it another way: If a practice or belief works for me and helps me connect with God, great but I have no right to force that practice or belief on someone else. Because that particular practice or belief may instead of bringing that person closer to God may pull him or her away from God. And by forcing my practice or belief of someone, all I have really done is wound and break the Body of Christ even more. And in reality, because of my singular focus, instead of being

a servant of God sharing God's love and grace, if I force my particular belief or practice on someone, then all I am really being is a theological bully, which really does nothing to build up the Kingdom of God here on earth.

What Paul is saying to the Romans and to us today is that when we come to the Lord's Table, we must find a balance between our rights as individuals and our responsibility to all of God's creation. Paul is saying that we must eat a balanced diet of faith and love as we continue to cultivate our relationship with God.

We know that when we eat too much of one thing, our whole biological system gets all out of whack. We have to eat a balanced diet to remain healthy. And the same can be said about what we take into the Body of Christ to feed our souls. We just can't practice individual faith all the time. We must practice communal love and grace of God as well.

So as we continue grow in our faith, as we continue to cultivate our relationship with God, we also become more aware of our connection to others. We also become more aware that our faith is not just about us as individuals. It is also about us creating opportunities for healing and wholeness. As we continue grow in our faith, we soon begin to realize that it is more important to work towards helping bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth for all of God's children than us being right in our beliefs and practices.

I know that many of you may have heard about the story of World Vision's change of HR policy. For those that don't know, World Vision International is one of the largest relief and development organizations in the world. The evangelical NGO is committed to three primary goals: transforming impoverished communities, responding to disasters, and seeking global social change through advocacy. The organization operates as a global umbrella with hundreds of national offices around the globe, funding nearly half of its work through private donations and the rest through internal programs and government grants.

This week, World Vision stated that it was changing its hiring policy to include gay Christians in same-sex marriages and then just a few days later, it changes that stance because of the back-lash it was receiving from conservative Christians who don't support such policy change.

Now, I'm not getting into whether World Vision was right or wrong. That's a whole separate conversation and a whole separate sermon for another day. What I want to share is a personal story shared with me about this effects of this decision on the children that World Vision supports, effects like "Hungry, thirsty, ill, alone, orphaned, disenfranchised, forgotten children. Children whose World Vision sponsors dropped them like hot potatoes when World Vision announced their HR policy change."

This story was shared with me by a young man who is the father of two children both of them adopted from Ethiopia. And here's what this man has to say as a Christian, as a father, as a tireless advocate for the poor and forgotten:

Now is not the time to debate theology. I once had a friend ask me what my theology is. I told him I hold to three points:

- *I believe in Jesus- His story, His message, what He lived and died for.*
- *I believe that I am called to love and be a friend to those around me in a manner pleasing to Him.*
- *Everything else is up for debate and personal interpretation. And I'm OK with that. Just don't let it get in the way of the first two.*

I have served and met hundreds, if not thousands, of impoverished children in third-world countries. Not one has ever asked me my religious denomination, theological beliefs, political leanings, or sexual orientation. They have thanked me for bringing them food and water and for playing basketball with them. They have hugged me and called me friend.

There are thousands of children who have lost their sponsorship in the last 24 hours because of World Vision's HR decision. I hold people like Russell Moore, Denny Burk and Franklin Graham responsible and accountable for that...I am incensed that, in order to prove a political/theological point, they have transferred the culture war squarely onto the backs of poor children.

My sons were those children. *My sons were two of the billions in this world who do not have access to clean water, mosquito nets to avoid malaria (which nearly killed one of my sons and did kill his birthfather), medicine (for manageable and preventable diseases- like HIV which nearly killed my other son). I cannot allow the culture war to be fought on the backs of my two sons. They are too precious. The family members they left behind in Africa are too precious. They are God's sons and daughters. And in the past 24 hours, they have been turned into pawns in some diluted culture war.*

Y'all, when I read JT's words, emailed to me, my stomach twisted and my heart swelled and I fought back tears as I emailed him back, asking if I could share his thoughts via my blog. He graciously said yes, and so I offer them to you as a call to my best hope for this world—***that we'd set down the swords, cease the screaming, and grab hold of a little humility.*** Our children are at stake. ALL our children.

You see, we as believers, as humans have a strange way of interacting and being with one another. We say that there is a right way and there is a wrong way. We tend to think our way is the right way and everyone else is wrong. We also tend to think that our way is God's way and everyone else is wrong.

As humankind, we have always been an either or type of society. But Paul clearly states that God doesn't work that way. That God is bigger than the limits we put on God. Paul says that God is and has always been and will always be a both and kind of God.

When we say either or, we limit God and we become theological bullies. When we say our way or no way, we are only eating a diet of faith and then our whole system gets out of whack. When we say that we are right and everyone else is wrong, we put ourselves in the place of God. And time and time again, Paul has told us that we are not God nor will we ever be.

Paul was constantly reminding the early church and is constantly remaining relevant today because he is still reminding us that our God is so much bigger than what I believe, what you believe, what we believe as a collective group.

God is constantly working to bring God's people together and God is going to use whatever means possible to do just that, even if it is a practice or a belief that makes us uncomfortable. If it brings someone to know the love and grace of God then that is all that matters.

All God cares about is cultivating a relationship with us as God's people. All God cares about is providing us with good nourishment to feed our souls. All God

cares about is welcoming every single one of God's children to God's table and inviting them to come and eat from the abundance of God.

That's all God cares about and we tend to forget this as we strive to find answers along our faith journey. We forget that faith alone should not determine what we do. We tend to forget that LOVE should always, always always lead us.

Our innermost beliefs may be right for us as individuals but our outward actions must always be done out of the love of God, and that love is so much bigger than the limits we try to place upon it.

As people of God, we need to realize that faith is an inner freedom between me and God. And that faith should not be the only thing that determines what we do and what we say. We are not an anything goes type of faith. If our actions, if our words hurt or prevent someone from coming to God, than as Paul says, we are not acting according to God's will.

We have never ever been called to practice a faith that only pleases ourselves. We the people of God have always always been called to act and speak in ways that please God and act and speak in ways that benefit our fellow human beings.

“We do no honor to our faith when our need to prove right and wrong gets in the way of caring for the very ones Jesus asked us to clothe, feed,

shelter and love. Our job is to (try to) love, to serve when and where we can, and to trust that in and among and around us all moves the Spirit of a loving and merciful God. A God who loves this Earth and all her children, and has simply asked that we do the same.

We are called to satisfy our hunger for God by eating a balanced diet of faith and love.

As we cultivate our relationships with our God, may we always let love lead us in all that we do and say. Amen.