

## **"Peace"**

Romans 14:15-21

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Third in a series on *Fruits of the Spirit*

**If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.**

**Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.**

It was the end of a long interview day. The Pastor Nominating Committee brought the candidate to Juan Pablo's, a local Tex-Mex restaurant. This was the first test. Pretty sure it would have been a tick mark in the negative column against the Rev. Sean Harper if he didn't like Tex-Mex. The formal interview was over, but this evening was just as important. Could they live together? Were they too different? Did they like to eat the same kind of food?

They settled around a large table at the noisy, bustling restaurant. Drink orders were taken. The drink order told Sean more about them than the other way around. When time came for the food orders, Sean was the last person to put his in. He ordered migas.

They thought to themselves, "Good, at least he knows what migas is!"

Sean asked the waiter. "Is there meat in it? I'd like mine without the meat."

Joe Turner, not missing a beat, turned to Sean and piped in, "You a vegetarian?"

"Well, yes, I don't eat meat."

"It's not a religion with you is it?"

"No it's not!" They laughed.

Dietary differences divide people. The way people eat, and what people eat, has long defined their cultural identity. We have a rather narrow range of what we consider fit to eat. If you order lamb in France and your French isn't so hot and you end up with lamb's brains, you know exactly what I am talking about!

The early church grappled with this, too. In our scripture today, Paul was indeed addressing a particular situation in which people were getting pretty uptight about what was being served at the common table. Yet the picture Paul paints is much bigger than food. Food was just an example of something people fought over.

Jews had hundreds of laws regarding the handling, preparation, and serving of food. Gentile converts to Christianity also had a history with food and drink, because of their idol worship. Food was how you knew someone was a Jew, or a pagan, or a Christian. Food was something that people argued about, even fought over. Paul asked Christians to let go of things that were not important (like what to eat and drink) in order to promote peace and unity.

Christians fight over lots of things today that are truly adiaphora. Adiaphora means "things indifferent." Things that really don't matter in the big scheme. Things that our faith does not hinge on, like whether or not the Rev. Harper ate meat or imbibed in an occasional beer. In some congregations, those things would be cause for a big show down. But really, truly, they are adiaphora.

We still cling to things which divide. It may not be food, but every person, every group has stumbling blocks. It may be "the way we've always done things." It may be which Communion set is used. It may be the color of paint on the walls, or whether we continue doing something in a way no one really wants to continue to do. It may be a perceived violation of a sacred space, even if that sacred space is a closet!

Why do we do this? Fear. Fear of change. Fear we will have to include people who are different from us. Fear that we will have to give up something precious. When we focus on things which are not important, we avoid those

things which are truly important. Isn't it easier to get busy with trivial things than to face the big giants staring us down from the corners of our mind?

The other thing is, when we fight about silly things, we deny our interconnectedness and our interdependence.

The Dallas snowstorm of February 11<sup>th</sup> was a great example of this. It actually brought out the best in many people, as neighbors helped each other, shared equipment, the able-bodied assisting those who were less able. People who hadn't even met some of their neighbors got to know each other. Maybe there is something to be said for a break from the grid.

It also brought out the worst in some people. Many households were without power for four entire days. Some residents actually refused to allow the power company to trim their tree branches to make repairs so their neighbors could have power restored. This is how wars get started.

Christian community offers an alternative to this. Christian community (when it is functioning like it's supposed to!) offers peace the world cannot give.

People come to church for many reasons. Some come because it is a comforting habit. Some come to see their friends. Others come because of their firm conviction this is how they show their belief in God. Others come to church to hear good music, or an interesting sermon, to be entertained, or to be encouraged.

Today, few walk into church because they seek to bear the fruits of God's spirit in their lives. Few are attracted to Christianity that demands much and asks even more. And yet this is what we are about. This is why we are here! All these other reasons are good, but they are not CENTRAL! We are to show such peace in our own lives that others will see it and want what we have. We are supposed to be in the world but not of the world. When we focus on things that are not important, we miss the boat entirely and we grieve God.

Today, few come to do the hard work of following Christ, because that is not what the culture says church is about. We are here because we believe there is something here the culture cannot give. This is exactly what each one of us so desperately needs. There is something here that brings meaning to this crazy, confusing, and often warring world. It is the very thing we hunger for. It is the only thing that gives true peace.

When others can see how much we love one another, and how much we love other people---when newcomers notice we are about giving, not receiving, when people here come to depend on one another more and to let things slide that don't make much difference, this is the work of the Spirit!

This is the work of the Spirit who calls us into unity, even when we disagree. This is the work of the Spirit who allows us to set aside our personal agendas.

This is the work of the Spirit who strengthens our connections to one another and gives us energy to reach outside ourselves and share Christ's peace with others.

I invite you to look deeply inside yourself. I invite you to ask yourself the following questions. "Am I living out the peace of Christ?" "Does being a Christian make a difference in how I live the other 6 days and 23 hours of the week?" "Do others wonder at the source of my joy, my love, my peace?"

If you cannot answer these questions in the affirmative, you are not alone. If you cannot honestly say that Christ makes a difference in your real life, in the way you talk to your boss, in the way you talk to your family, in the way you prioritize your budget, don't feel like the Lone Ranger. God is still working on you. God is still working on me!

Perhaps today is the day you will let down the wall which has made it impossible to God to enter in. Perhaps today is the day you will find yourself truly questioning your commitment, seriously looking at whether you have even allowed God's Spirit a little foothold into your life. A toehold that just might open a door to peace. Today is the day. Now is the time.

Join me in prayer. In prayer we begin. Let's get down on our knees, now, let's do it. This is not what's usually done here, but this is Lent, and I am serious.

Join me now and pray with me. If you are not physically able to kneel, bend over in prayer.

Bend yourself in God's direction, because this is the only possible way we will ever have peace in our lives.

Bend yourself in God's direction, not because peace is a commodity you can earn, not because peace is a skill you can develop, but because it is God's grace that will allow it to unfold in you.

Bend yourself in God's direction, because this is the only direction we are supposed to bend in. Bend yourself in God's direction, because this is the way we are made to bend.

Let us pray.

God, give us peaceful, bendable hearts.

Break down our pride, our fear, our self-focus.

Dismantle stony walls between us and the stranger

Between us and our best selves

Between us and your future.

Destroy our stumbling blocks: our busyness, our preferences, our reverence for the past instead of for you,

Squash our hypocrisy and close-mindedness, our fear of the future and our fear of failure.

Shake us out of our comfort zone, our complacency, our neatly packaged Sunday morning Christianity.

Build up, instead, our desire to connect, our time to build bridges.

Use us, each one of us today, this week, to create peace between ourselves and another human being.

Build our faith in action, our witness outside here,

So that when people see us, and talk about us, they will say,

"We know they are Christians by their love, by their joy, and by their peace."

So that, when others get to know us, they will say, "I want what it is you have."

The peace of Christ. The peace that surpasses all understanding. Amen.