

Sunday November 27, 2022
Lesson 13: Sensitivity Training
Scripture: Romans 14: 13-19

Context:

Today we end our series titled “Freedom.” Thus, we also conclude our unit titled: “Faithful Conversations.” The focus of the unit has been on how we have neighborly conversations with those different than us who might be outside our comfort zones. Today’s scripture lesson comes from the New Testament with Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. The purpose of today’s lesson will be to remain true to our own faith traditions and celebrations while exhibiting respect to those of other tradition.

This timely letter of Paul to the church in Rome spoke to several issues surfacing in the early Christian community. Throughout Romans, Paul sought to give the people a deeper theological understanding of God’s gracious Lordship in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who unites the Christian community, and it is he who will overcome the dangers posed to unity by self-righteous self-assertion and the emphasis on rights at the expense of responsibilities.¹ This passage in today’s lesson asserts Christians are in danger as they seek judgment and preference over unity and discipleship.

Paul names the elephant in the room as he states they have moved from a place of supporting and loving each other to a place of judging one another. The issue comes from what has been hinted at in early parts of the letter and now comes to the forefront. Gentile converts new to the Christian faith had followed religious practices which involved eating meat which had been sacrificed to some god or goddess, or which involved drinking wine as part of their participation in cultic celebrations.² Yet when they converted to Christianity, they still saw participating in such rituals or eating and drinking items from such events as honoring previous convictions.³ Thus, conflict arises when they see others not recognizing the convictions.

On the other side of the conflict were Christians who felt differently. The freedom in Christ should allow Christians to eat or drink whatever they pleased.⁴ While indeed Paul concedes they have a point, he focuses on Christian maturity. Those individuals have an undeniable right tempered by responsibility to others.⁵ With freedom there also comes responsibility. So, they are to be sensitive to those individuals and yet not focus on telling them they are wrong or to be pushed out of Christian community. For all parties, they are to strive for peace, righteousness, and joy. Thus, they are to find a way to live with each other, not antagonizing one another out of hate or judgment.

¹ Achtemeier, Paul J. “Romans.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 223.

² Ibid., 220.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 221.

Application

Paul's timely conversation about rights and responsibilities as tied to freedom was certainly not just for the early Christian church. They may have been the first to struggle with norms and how to respect one another, and yet there were certainly not the last. Every day and age, there has been the struggle within Christian circles about judging and living with one another's differences. And then the same extends to those Christian attitudes to those outside of our own faith tradition.

When I went through confirmation, I made a vow to serve and follow Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. While it has taken years to fully understand what this means (with room for even more growth), it is a vow I take seriously. I cannot recognize any other sovereign entity as superseding Jesus Christ. He is the one who guides and leads me; and it is only him who redeems and restores my soul.

Even as I embrace this vow and will fully defend it, I also recognize Jesus calls me to be respectful and courteous of those of other faith traditions. While I cannot recognize what others believe as the ultimate truth, I can find other commonalities in focusing on righteousness, peace, and joy. I can build up those of different faith traditions without conceding anything I believe in or hold dear.

Perhaps the greatest danger we as Christians can face is when we have a view of faith where we believe ours is so superior, we must judge others of different traditions. I have sometimes made assumptions about celebrations, gender roles, religious garb, and beliefs of other religious traditions and believed others are somehow less enlightened than the Christian faith. It's very easy to do. Just sit down and make a list of stereotypes and what you think is going on in those traditions.

An easy example is the hijab worn in the Islamic tradition. We see it and we assume women are seen as less than and are treated abusively in the Muslim tradition. Yet if you research or ask someone of the Islamic faith, they will tell you how the hijab is tied to modesty and to maintain privacy from unrelated males as a sign to not seek attention. I have even had a Muslim woman express to me how it allows her to not be seen as an object of desire or consumerism as it does not fall into the norms of the world. What a beautiful way to think of how important our own bodies are and how they are gifts not to be exploited for others.

Yet have you ever thought about the shoe to go on the other foot? I once had a Christian professor invite us to think about how those not familiar with the Christian tradition to look at our symbols and traditions. We talk about things like "drinking the body and blood" of someone else when we receive Holy Communion. Our main recognizable symbol is not something deemed beautiful or pretty; it is a cross, a symbol of execution used by an empire known for brutality and cruelty. We have hymns where we speak of the "blood" of someone else cleansing us.

Now we know what those things means, or we at least have an idea of the significance. Yet just think to those outside how those things might appear or look, and then think about how we look and examine others. Just as we hope someone would listen to us about what those things means and why they're important to us, might we listen to others and respect their symbols, traditions, and beliefs?

I once had a Bishop who taught at my seminary about the mission of the church. He would always repeat, "folks we have to find a way to get along." He was talking about multiple groups of people: the Democrats and Republicans in our congregations, the Baptists and the Methodists in the local community, and then Christians and the various world religions. I hold

those words dear to my heart as I look at the brokenness in our world where we have forgotten we belong to one another. Like our Lord says, might we find goodness in God's kingdom by seeking righteousness, peace, and joy.

How do you show love to those different than you? Why do you think God wants us to not judge one another? What religious traditions do you make assumptions about when it comes to beliefs and practices? If a new person came to your community of faith, what things might they see as strange or even confusing? How can we cultivate righteousness, peace, and joy with others?

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