

There's a little bit of British folk wisdom that says: "Faults are thick where love is thin." I'm sure that you have seen or maybe you have even been *in* relationships or communities where judgmental fault-finding is more prominent than loving mutual regard.

Paul and Jesus, in our readings this morning, are offering a way out of those situations. Paul, in his letter to the emerging church in Rome, is giving people tools for building up love. Matthew's Jesus provides a powerful path to Peter for repairing fault damages. Between the two of them, Paul and Jesus shed light on the characteristics of a community centered on the love of God and Christ's presence in our practices of forgiveness and repentance.

University of Washington psychologist John Gottman has spent more than 25 years studying what makes relationships last. Gottman's research exposed a distinction between conflicts that erode relationship and those that are part of a healthy relationship.

People in thriving relationships demonstrate a ratio of five positive emotional experiences for every single negative one. The positive experiences do not all have to be grand gestures. They can be as simple as a thank-you, a smile or a shared laugh.

Gottman's research also showed that disagreements and arguments, even expressions of anger, are part of most healthy relationships. These snags are destructive *only* when they are characterized by criticism, contempt, defensiveness or withdrawal. Those four characteristics are fault-lines.

And what is true for a marriage is consistent for a community: "faults are thick where love is thin."

Three weeks ago, we heard Jesus ask his followers, "Who are people saying the Son of the Human to be?" This week, Paul and Jesus offer us ways to think about: "Who are people saying the parish of St. Elizabeth to be? Who are people saying that *we* are?" If we are intentional, we can create a parish where faults are thin and love is thick.

Paul's letter to the Romans may sound odd. You may be wondering about Paul's rather remarkable references to "weak" vegetarians and "strong" meat-eaters. Surely, the church has other more pressing matters to deal with. Nero is burning Christians to provide light for his gardens and Paul is writing about people who think one day is better than other days, and people who

think all days are alike. What on earth do these strangely specific details have to do with building a community of love?

The answer lies in the context of Paul's letter. Paul is a Jewish follower of Jesus, a Jewish rabbi and reformer. Paul is writing to a collection of other Jesus-followers in one of the largest Mediterranean cities of the ancient world.

With a multi-cultural population of nearly a million people, first century Rome was a wealthy city and home to a range of economic classes, languages and religions. Most Romans followed Greek mythology, or they worshipped the emperor or one or more of a variety of gods and demigods. And there were as many as 50,000 Jews in Rome, many of whom had joined the emerging small groups of Christ-followers.

In this reading, Paul is engaging the dynamics of unity and diversity. What he says to the Roman church is impressive. What he does *not* say is magnificent.

Paul's audience would certainly have known about vegetarians, though they would have assumed motivations that are different than we think of today. Almost no one would have chosen the diet for their health or to avoid killing animals. Most of them lived so close to the food they produced that killing a goat would not have been any more upsetting than picking a ripe fig.

No, the concern, especially in a big city like Rome, had to do with avoiding the *wrong kind* of meat. Jews and some former pagans would not eat meat that had not been slaughtered according to proper Jewish tradition or that had been offered as a sacrifice to a pagan idol. And because one could never be certain where the meat in the market came from, many chose simply to be vegetarian. Some of these same Christ-followers are also keeping feast days and fast days from their former lives.

Barely concealing his own bias, Paul calls these folks "weak." Maybe it's just that hard not to judge others, even for Paul.

Paul, himself a devout Jew, has concluded that all foods and all days are equally fitting for believers to enjoy because God is the creator of all things. Paul calls those who share his perspective "strong." Maybe he just assumed that most of the church in Rome shared his perspective and is instructing them to be welcoming to the smaller number who do not.

These surface differences in diet and devotion are not trivial. They reflect far deeper issues in the early church that were causing some Roman house churches to deny or exclude people. What Paul did *not* say, even if it

was the truth, is that there are Jewish Christians and some pagan Christians who don't eat meat, and there are Gentile Christians who do eat meat, even pork.

Bishop Tom Wright points to the deeper reason that Paul simply said, "Some of us do it this way, some of us do it that way." Bishop Wright thinks that Paul is trying to break down the walls that we so easily put up between people of differing ethnicity. If Paul had written "Jewish Christians do it this way, Gentile Christians do it that way," he would have reinforced the very walls that he intended to dissolve.

We are *still* enticed by the impulse to correct people who don't see life the way that we do. And if we let ourselves be distracted by differences of opinion or preference, we can begin to slip out of our servanthood role into the role of church police. Eventually, we withdraw from our identity as children of God and become increasingly attached to a cause, a political stance or a moral posture.

Eventually, in defense of our conviction in the righteousness of our cause, we rationalize shutting down to the point that we judge and alienate other Christ-followers who don't share our perspective. We begin to attach our hearts and minds to a *human cause* instead of to *God*. In time, we stop living by the love and forgiveness of God. We stop passing on the unearned mercy that God has given us.

And so, Paul repeatedly warns us not to judge our sisters and brothers in Christ. Instead, we have the rare opportunity to experience the truly radical nature of God's grace.

We don't abandon our principles. We *relinquish them to God* in the awareness that God may teach us even higher principles. We don't surrender truth and justice. We loosen our attention on them long enough to relax into an imperfect foretaste of the truth and justice of heaven.

Our worship together opens us to an atmosphere of mutual honor and respect, where our focus is on expressing our love and gratitude to God. Our purpose is not to weed out people who are wrong from those who are right. Our ambition is to drink in and make evident God's love and unity as Christ's servants.

What Paul also did *not* say is that we should never disagree. Paul seems to anticipate Gottman's research by insisting that our disharmony be tempered with the love of God. What's more, Paul claims that people will recognize Christ-followers, and the Christ among us and in us, *by the way*

that we love. And that way involves our alternative to disagreements that decay into criticism, contempt, defensiveness or withdrawal. We offer forgiveness.

The forgiveness that Jesus is talking about is more than the kind of occasional event on Peter's mind – exchanges between specific people. Peter asks Jesus if seven times is often enough to forgive a brother or sister in the faith. Like we all do from time to time, Peter has lost the plot.

The point is not about how *many* times we forgive any more than it is about whether we should eat meat or keep feast-days. We forgive because *God* forgives. We forgive because when we turn toward Christ and away from our own selfishness, God forgives.

We forgive because when we turn toward Christ and away from our criticizing and contempt, God forgives. We forgive because when we let our self-serving defenses down in search of God, God forgives us and loves us.

The standard, you see, is not human, but divine. God, the source of life, freely spills love and forgiveness to dissolve the divisions that we create. The more we drink God's love and forgiveness in and pour it out, the more love and forgiveness become what we *are*, and less what we *do*.

The guiding star is not our own merit, but God's generous and free-flowing mercy. What God gave us in the crucified and risen Christ is liberation from our addiction to retaliation, reprisal and recompense.

We are also free, of course, to return to that addiction if we choose.

Instead, why not learn to see each other as God sees all of us: with limitless love and infinite forgiveness?

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