

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 14, 2014

## **Why Can't Christians Get Along With Each Other**

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Romans 14:1-12

One thing that many pastors, including me, are very concerned about is why Christians cannot exist in harmony with one another and why disagreements between people lead to churches and denominations splitting apart. We worship the same Lord yet we can't get along together. Why?

A major reason is stubbornness about things which in truth have little to do with Christ and his message of salvation. A lot of these divisions stem from things taken out of their historical context from the old Jewish Law, the 613 commandments laid out in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. These commandments were created for a purpose which was quite valid thousands of years ago but which, in many cases, have little relevance today, yet congregations and denominations can get into very contentious arguments over them and schisms arise, schisms which often last for generations. But, if those who have such strong convictions would just sit quietly and prayerfully and reflect upon the question of how relevant the argument is today, and more importantly, how Jesus would have felt about it, many such disputes would have disappeared. Unfortunately people get stubborn and don't do that.

Every time the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) meets, as they did this past June, there are arguments and major debates over issues which inevitably result in some churches splitting or leaving the denomination, and we are not alone. It happens with the Methodists, the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Baptists, and with virtually every Protestant denomination. Even within the Roman Catholic Church, congregations and priests defy Rome and Papal decrees.

Are these arguments new? Certainly not. They are nothing new at all and in fact have existed throughout all of the history of Christianity. Many of Paul's letters were aimed at divisions within the early churches and were efforts to resolve differences which had arisen.

Our scripture reading today is one such example. Paul is writing to the church in Rome and points out several areas of discord. Should we be vegetarians? That was one argument he mentions. Should we criticize someone else's servants? Yes or no? That was another dispute. Should we judge others? What should we do?

Today churches split over women in the pulpit, baptism by sprinkling or immersion, divorce, homosexuality, consumption of alcohol, political views and many trivial things like what color to paint the sanctuary. Yet all of these issues, as divisive as they can be, are insignificant if one considers what Paul has written in his letter to the Romans,

*<sup>10</sup> You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. <sup>11</sup> It is written:*

*"As surely as I live," says the Lord,  
'every knee will bow before me;  
every tongue will acknowledge God.'"*

*<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*

Further on, Paul says in Romans 14:13:

*<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.*

And in Romans 14:22:

*<sup>22</sup> So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.*

In a sermon that he gave on the same scripture passage as I am using today, the Rev. Fred B. Craddock talked about reading grave markers in the cemetery of a church he was preaching at. He said:

*All of the other graves were lined up in a row, but this one grave was cross-wise or, as we used to say, "cattywampus." At that angle, it actually took up three burial plots. I pondered that. What a careless thing to do. Why would they do that?*

*Suddenly I became aware of another man walking around in the cemetery, perhaps for the same reason as I was. I said to him, "Are you from around here?"*

*"Yeah," he said. "You're looking at that grave, aren't you?"*

*"Yes."*

*"I knew that fellow." The grave marker recorded that the man had died in 1994 in his seventies. "We were in the same church. I knew him well. Knew him all my life."*

*I said. "Why this burial at an angle?"*

*"Well, the family wanted that, and the church agreed."*

*"But why?" I asked.*

*"Because that's the kind of guy he was."*

*I said, "What do you mean, 'That's the kind of guy he was'?"*

*"He was crossways with everybody and everything. We never knew him to be pleased about anything at home or at church. 'Well, why's she doing that?' he'd say, or 'Why'd they ask him to do that?' or 'Well, he's the wrong one to be doing this,' or 'Well, I wonder who decided to do that?' He said that kind of stuff all the time, all the time, and the family decided they wouldn't try to change him just because he was dead. So they buried him crosswise."*

*"That was an awful thing to do." I said.*

*"They wanted it to be a witness. The family said if God wants to straighten him out then God can straighten him out. But he left here just like he lived."*

*When he said that, I thought about our text for this morning from Romans 14.1 had been thinking about and studying this text all week, and it occurred to me there were probably some folk in the churches that Paul would like to have buried cattywampus. He would have laid them out crosswise, because that is the way they were, always quarreling and picking. This grave in the cemetery was for a man who, I was told, was always at church, who served the church in various capacities, but who was never in agreement or pleased. He was picky, picky, picky all the time, but he was always there at church. Paul knew the type. In fact, I know there were some in the church at Corinth that Paul probably would have buried crosswise, and maybe, even though he had never been there, maybe from what he heard there were some of the same types in the church at Rome."*

*(The Cherry Log Sermons, Fred B. Craddock, Westminster John Knox press, Louisville, 2001)*

The daily devotional guide, Our Daily Bread, for February 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year said, *“Like believers in Rome centuries ago, believers today sometimes make up rules for others to follow and insist on adherence to certain behaviors and beliefs that the Bible says little or nothing about. These ‘stumbling blocks’ make it difficult for followers of Jesus to continue in the way of faith that he came to show us --- that salvation is by grace not works (Gal. 2:16). It requires only that we trust in His death and resurrection for forgiveness. We can celebrate the good news of Christ ... by resolving not to set up hurdles that cause people to stumble.”*

Yes, the church has always had people who were cattywampus to what others thought and unfortunately many of these people had the “my way or the highway” attitude. Rather than staying with the church and risking being buried crosswise, they left the church and took with them those who thought as they did --- and it continues to happen to this day.

Whenever you personally take exception to something that the church does or says, ask yourself if you are being cattywampus or not. Ask yourself if the issue is really fundamental to Christ’s message of love and grace. If it isn’t, remember what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. Remember also that you worship the same Lord and Savior as do the persons you disagree with. If every Christian did that, we wouldn’t have so many divisions within the Church. There wouldn’t be a Presbyterian Church, a Lutheran Church, a Baptist Church, and Episcopal Church or any other denomination --- there would just be one Universal Church as Jesus intended.

**Amen.**

(Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible)