ACCOUNTABLE TO WHOM?

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 7:1-5

Grandma Datt was one of the stalwarts of the church in which I grew up in Slippery Rock, PA. She was a tiny woman with a big heart, a faithful woman who loved to cook and visit and help out at the church. She was kind of like Granny Clampett from the Beverly Hillbillies, but not as cranky! She taught a Sunday School class for about 150 years and was an ardent member of the local Women’s Christian Temperance Union which strongly objected to the use of all forms of alcohol in any setting. She was also a big fan of potluck suppers. At one of those suppers, she happened to try a zucchini casserole that my mom had made. Grandma Datt raved about it and asked my mom for the recipe. A few weeks later as the next potluck approached Grandma Datt told my mom that she hoped my mom would bring that wonderful zucchini casserole again and reminded my mom that she had yet to give her the recipe. My mom did bring that zucchini casserole again – especially for Grandma Datt – and she brought it many times after that, but she never did give Grandma Datt the recipe which was: “Zucchini in White Wine Sauce.” Grandma Datt was better off not knowing!

To drink or not to drink, to eat meat or not to eat meat, to play cards on Sunday or not to play cards on Sunday, to shop or not to shop on the Sabbath – there are a host of issues with which the church has wrestled across the years as Christians of various stripes have sought to identify faithful paths for day to day living. While there may be good reasons for individuals to make particular choices about one practice or another – for health reasons for instance – there are some practices which receive blanket condemnation in some corners of the church as hard and fast rules which all Christians must follow on the path to faithfulness – whether Jesus specifically mentioned them or not.

As Christians we try to follow faithful paths, but often in our history we have tried to define that path for others and judged them when they made choices different from our own. We have deep roots in wrestling with such issues in the church as we read in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. The question for that fledgling community was how to be faithful Christians in the 1st century. They had very little to guide them – no Gospels as yet, no ordained ministers or elders, no traditions to follow, just the Hebrew Scriptures and the stories of Jesus handed down by mouth and the advice of Christian leaders like Paul to whom they turned with their questions. In Rome the issue seemed to be dietary practices – should Christians eat meat – but the real issue was self-righteous judgment. Those who believed that Christians had no dietary restrictions judged those who were vegetarians as weak in faith. The vegetarians who believed that eating meat was forbidden because it may have been offered to idols judged the omnivores as unfaithful. Each saw the choice to eat meat or not to eat meat as a choice to be faithful or unfaithful, and they judged any choice but their own as unfaithful. The result was quarreling within the church between two groups who judged themselves righteous and the others unrighteous.

We have seen such debates in the church across the years on a multitude of issues, and sadly many of those debates have resulted in division. There have been divisions over theological issues and ecclesiastical practices, divisions over geography and public policy. Some judged icons to be idolatrous art while others found them inspirational for recalling the stories of God at work in the lives of saints. Some today regard the role of women to be limited by Scripture while we believe the full participation of women to be a faithful expression of God’s will. There have been church wars over what kind of music is appropriate, if any, or what color the carpet should be or whether evolution is compatible with the Bible’s account of creation. The Methodist church is currently dividing over disagreements about same-sex marriage, an issue we Presbyterians wrestled with a few years back before deciding to allow individual churches to follow their conscience on this matter. Here at Covenant, we decided to welcome all equally, believing that marriage between those of the same gender can be a faithful expression of God’s will as expressed in Scripture, though not all Presbyterians are of one mind on this issue. We all read the same Bible but may interpret passages differently in seeking to discern a faithful path in the 21st century.

Paul is pretty clear in his advice to the church in Rome – what unites us is greater than what divides us – and neither the vegetarians nor the omnivores, should pass judgment upon the other. Each is trying to be faithful in his or her own way, and rather than choose sides in this dietary debate, Paul elects to let God be the judge. “Who are you to pass judgment on your brother or sister?” Paul asks. Christ is Lord of all – of omnivores and vegetarians alike – and each will be judged by God alone. Paul saw no reason for either side to take up the mantle of judge in that debate and pointedly declined to assume it himself. To be a faithful Christian did not turn on whether one ate meat or not, and the quarreling which resulted over this issue did no honor to God.

Paul had been involved in such a debate with regard to Gentile Christians. Then the issue was whether Gentile followers needed to follow dietary rules and be circumcised (which was a real deterrent to recruiting new followers), or whether faith in Christ and baptism were enough. Were Christians bound to obey Jewish Law? The decision of the early church was that Christ had fulfilled the Law and so Gentile followers did not need to be circumcised or follow dietary rules in order to be disciples of Jesus. Christians were united, not by obedience to the Law, but by faith in Christ affirmed by their baptism. Some of those who had been labeled unclean under the Law – Samaritans, Gentiles, and eunuchs – were no longer excluded from the community but were welcomed with open arms as they were. Their identity in Christ trumped all those ways in which they were different. What united them in Christ was greater than all that might divide them.

Paul’s advice echoes Jesus’ concern about self-righteous judgment in his Sermon on the Mount. “*Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?*” Jesus asks. Why are you so intent on judging others, yet blind to your own shortcomings? We should be more intentional about recognizing our sin, acknowledging it, and repenting of it, and less intent upon judging the shortcomings of others, for we all are accountable to God alone. We should listen to one another and speak the truth in love. We all are sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace, so we should be cautious about pointing out the need for others’ repentance before repenting ourselves! In time, God will make the faithful path clear.

Within the life of this Covenant community, we have generally wrestled well with difficult questions. We have not necessarily agreed on them all, but as I said at the time of our debate about Weekday Religious Education several years ago, we disagree with one another but are not disagreeable, for what unites us is greater than what divides us. We can disagree with one another without breaking the bonds of our unity in Christ, and in doing so, we bear witness to the world to the power of Christ’s good news and its primacy in our lives. What unites us is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus who came for all of us and calls us to live in wholehearted love for God and with love for one another. It is that call we seek to live into as we seek to discern how we should live faithfully together amid the challenges of the 21st century.

Martin Thielen tells of a young college student named Bill who was a bit of a rebel. His hair flew out in every direction spiked with vivid colors; he had a nose ring, was always barefoot, and was dressed in jeans and a tattered T-shirt as he walked into the very traditional mainline church across the street from the college campus. The service had already started when he walked into the sanctuary barefoot with his hair a particularly vibrant color that day. The church was packed as Bill walked down the center aisle looking for a seat, but he could find none. People were surprised at the appearance of this strange-looking stranger in their midst, and as Bill got closer to the front of the sanctuary people began to get a little nervous as to what might happen. As he got to the front of the sanctuary Bill realized there were no seats left, so he just sat down in the aisle. About that time one of the old patriarchs of the church began to make his way down the aisle toward Bill. The man was in his eighties, had silver-gray hair, and wore an impeccable three-piece suit. He was a righteous, dignified man by all accounts, and his cane clicked against the floor as he slowly made his way up the aisle to where the boy was sitting. No one else moved. Not a sound was heard except the click-click-click of the cane against the floor. The whole congregation knew the old man would banish this kid from the church; the question was, “How?” All eyes were upon him as the patriarch finally reached the boy, paused a moment, and with a clatter dropped his cane on the floor. Then with great difficulty, the old man lowered himself to the floor and sat next to the boy. And as he did, the man reached out his hand and said, ‘Welcome to our church,’ and there he sat for the rest of the service.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

How do we deal with differences among us? We love one another through them and leave the judging to God. We welcome one another across our differences. Paul says that all of us will one day stand before the divine judge and be accountable to God and God alone. On that day the questions will not be: Was your theology perfect? Did you correctly point out the sins of others? Did you get the practices just right? Can you accurately articulate a description of the Trinity? Instead God will ask: Did you love your neighbor? Did you forgive your brother? Did you help your sister? Did you welcome the stranger? Did you serve the Lord? For it is that Lord to whom we are accountable, the Lord who loves us – loves us one and all![[2]](#endnote-2) Amen

1. Martin Thielen, *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2014, pp.145-146 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Craig Kocher, “Living By the Word”, *Christian Century*, September 9, 2008, p.22 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)