

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, IN 47201**

**Rev. Harriet Wilkin
September 17, 2023**

**“Accept One Another In Love”
Text: Romans 14:1-12**

This last week I took time to reflect on the passage from Romans. My thoughts were going in so many different directions. There were so many different ways that I could approach this text and I tried several sermon writing techniques that I have used over the years to narrow in on what the Holy Spirit was asking me to preach on this week.

The words that stood out to me in the text from Romans were the words weak and judgement. Paul wrote specifically to the Roman Christians as to what and how they were supposed to live their lives, what rituals they were supposed to follow and what it meant to follow those rituals. It is no different than how Paul instructed the Corinthians or the Galatians to act - how they were to treat one another. Each of the times Paul covered the idea of love and not to use judgement, he always stressed the importance of what it meant to appreciate one another, to be welcoming, to show and act with hospitality, and to include with compassion. There is something else that Paul did at the beginning of each of the letters that he wrote, he started by giving thanks for them and extending grace and peace. Paul would extend a prayer and then he went into his teaching - addressing the situations that each community was dealing with. He personalized the learning lessons to their cultural context. To the Colossians, he expressed to them that they were in his prayers. Paul continued each time through his teachings, the openness of hospitality and what it was to be loved and welcomed within the community.

When receiving an invitation to someone's home for a meal, you have been invited into their space. They are inviting you to be part of their lives. When you arrive at the person's home you are greeted with a warm welcome and invited to come in. What is your reaction when they ask you to sit down? You might be hesitant to where to sit - for someone might say, "wait that is my spot." Like Sheldon would say if someone sat in his spot on the couch in the TV show, "The Big Bang Theory." - or someone might say if you are new at a church on a Sunday and you enter the sanctuary and you are uncertain where to sit, because someone might ask you to move - because they could say - "that is my pew, or my spot."

Which back in the early days of the churches being built in the United States, and in particular in the New England, New York area, the pews in the older historical church buildings - the pews are numbered. Before the days of having offering envelopes with numbers assigned to people, families would give according to their pew number. Even years after the pew numbers were no longer being used, the pews were still understood to be such and such's place to sit in the sanctuary. In some cases, those families with greater wealth sat closer to the pulpit.

To this day, in the historical church that I attended as a child and youth, I can tell you exactly where the families of the church sat each and every Sunday. It was an unwritten understanding that in no situation was anyone else to sit in certain pews. I remember when my great-uncle passed away and my whole family sat upfront in the reserved pews how different it felt to sit upfront. For it wasn't where my family - extended family would normally sit. But as the grieving family and how loved my great-uncle was in that community, the community of faith surrounded us with love.

As I thought about all that Paul was presenting in today's text, I reflected on the idea of being welcomed with open hospitality, the idea of being accepted for how we are, to be included with compassion - with no judgment casted, and maybe what should have been first is also last - prayer.

Even in the stories that I told last week about the teenagers from the "last change" high school and the ladies who were being released from prison received an open welcome without judgment being given. They were being accepted for who they were, and they were included in the having a meal together, which turned into something greater for the ladies at the Loveladies Center. They were given a place to call home.

What does it mean to have a place that is considered home?

As I thought about all of this, I started reflecting on what it would mean if we were to sit and light a candle that represented what it meant to not to place judgment as a way of processing what it meant to love without judgement.

What if we were to envision a person's story differently? Instead of reacting with judgement we extend compassion. What if you saw a person crossing the street slower than you would like them to cross the road. You have a place to be, and they are taking too long and the cars behind you then pull out from behind you as you start to move because they are in more of a hurry than you are. They pass you by and give you a look. But that person who crossed the street has a story and needed to take their time because maybe the person crossing the street was struggling with a difficult decision to make, maybe they needed to process through something, or maybe they have an invisible disability – maybe they have trouble breathing, maybe they have some other health issue – what if we took time to get to know them and their story?

When I was in college, I took American Sign Language.

My professor, who was deaf, told us a story of her traveling to Hawaii. When she was stepping off the plane, she asked her friend why they were being greeted with the sign for the color "yellow."

Her friend who was with her said, that is the sign in Hawaii for hello and good-bye.

Those greeting them in the airport were greeting them in Sign language to make them feel welcomed. Why didn't my professor know what hello, that she mistaken it for the sign of yellow

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Sign Language is not universal. Even within the lower 48 states and around the world, signs in sign language differ.

What if we were to change our own perception of the other person and extended hospitality and take judgment out of the equation? What if we were to take time to be present with the person and give grace?

Acceptance of our personal selves and of others through love allows us not to focus on the weakness or what we preserve as different.

When we judge – it creates a division. We are trying to set the other person apart from us. Either because we don't understand their position or we haven't taken time to get to know them. If we did – we might learn of similarities or find ways that end up drawing us closer in relationship as friends even with differences and draws us closer to God.

Even with our own selves, we can cast judgment saying why can't I do this faster? I should have been done with the project by now. The questions of why creep in and we can lose a sense of what we are worth.

By focusing on the strengths and how to lift each other up to strengthen the team and not about changing the other person, but to heighten each other's abilities.

Judgements can play mind tricks on us. We might see a situation with a person in front of us as a challenge more than what we had in mind. Once we move past our own first reactions and what others might say and focus on the way we can move forward by asking for help from team members, opportunities emerge. We are opening ourselves up to see other points of view. We are allowing others to feel comfortable to share their story with you.

Paul invites the Christians in Roman and us to accept without judgement. How many times did Jesus do the same thing? Jesus stepped out of the well-maintained path and

went to those who were placed on the margins, to those who were hurting, to those who were in the need of someone just to be present with them, to those who were having a difficult day because of how they were being judged by those in their village and the stories of love and compassion from Christ are abundant.

How can we help another person to be accepted?

Are we willing to see life through the lens of the other person and not with pity, but with a shared appreciation and understanding from a different point of view?

Are we willing to have the no judgement zone?

We have all been welcomed to the table. Jesus left no one out even when feeding the 15,000 people.

Even in this text from Romans, Paul is cautioning the readers of the letter that rituals, cultural, and various rules that we stand by as important - what matters above all is how we define love. When we focus on other's weaknesses, or we judge – we cause the whole body of Christ to

suffer. We even say as a community when someone is baptized that we will help each other to grow closer to God, not that we are going to judge or ask the person to change who they are, but we will see the person God has created and support them through their journey with Christ.

Paul wants to make things clear to the Christians in Rome that when it comes to food and festivals, they are to respect one another and spend time with one another at the table. That just because someone else might have different things they eat; they should not be judged whether or not they follow the food preparations according to the law and how people correctly observe the high Holy days.

Some of what Paul covers in the text might sound trivial. But in that context those issues of what people were eating or not eating and how they were treating one another. The situations they were trying to work through were not trivial. Those situations were important to that community. It is no different for us.

For yourself what are the top 5 situations that are on your mind between news stories that we hear on the news stations and the situations that as a church continue to deal with? Those situations are important to you. You might be called to action. You might be called to prayer. You might be called to sing. You might be called to welcome. You might be called to extend open hospitality without judgement.

And just maybe this is where we should have started and instead of ended - in prayer.

Yet sometimes we have to work through the stuff before we finally settle down to be in prayer. When really prayer and reflection should be a first candle. Again, it is all about the personal preference. We can't judge another's ritual with God, for it might work for them.

Romans 14: 13 -14

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.

Verse 17 – 18

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 receives human approval.

Verse 22

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.

Chapter 15: 5-7

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Just as Paul taught the Christians in Rome to extend hospitality, we too are to love one another for who each person is, we are to look past what we consider failings, we are to look past how they dress, what they eat or don't eat, how they live or what work they do – for we are all loved by God.

Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.