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**Between God and You – Romans 14:13-23**

Paul's letter to the Romans is unique. He's writing from one of his most challenging communities, Corinth, to a group of believers in the Way of Jesus Christ (as it was then known) he has never yet met – though hopes to soon. But Paul takes nothing for granted; he has been at the service of his Lord long enough to know that at any moment his well-laid and carefully formulated plans may go completely off the rails. He's experienced that time and again.

So he tells these people he's never met as much as he can in one dose – that's why this is, by far, the longest of his letters. Even as early as Paul's ministry, just a few years after Christ's resurrection, the community of believers is riddled with a tremendous spectrum of belief, from those who are certain that Jesus was never truly flesh and blood, but a walking spirit, to those who argued that he could not possibly be divine; from those who would force all who follow Christ to live by every word of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to those who believe the Father God of Jesus Christ to be another God entirely from that of the Jews. All in one place, all trying to follow Christ.

For Paul and for the believers in Rome, the most pressing controversy seems to be between those who held that to be a Christian meant first and foremost to be a Jew, a child of Abraham, for males meaning circumcision, for all meaning strict obedience to the laws and commands of the Hebrew Scriptures on one side, and those, like Paul, who believed that in Christ God had made all believers into not just children of Abraham, but adopted by God into God's own personal family. Gentile, Jew – didn't matter. Two very different perspectives in one community of faith, with huge implications.

And that's how we find ourselves in this seemingly bizarre discussion of food.

Paul's talking about what we eat and drink, but his overarching concern is how those who accept the redemption of Christ ought to relate to these laws, which were, at least the ones in Scripture, given by God to guide human life and interaction.

And, basically, Paul splits the issue.

If you take the whole of his teaching as we have received it, he argues in one place that the Law has no meaning at all - in fact is death - for those who are in Christ, while in another place he says that the Law – or at least parts of it – or at least Paul's interpretation and modification of parts of it – are definitely key to faithful Christian living.

One thing is certain: Paul's understanding of our obligation to these ancient laws is that that obligation is a two-way street. Take his argument about meat, for example. He (and Peter too, in his famous vision where God commands Peter to eat all sorts of creatures that were forbidden under the law), Paul argues that nothing that God has made can be unclean, can be ritually improper to eat. Not even pork! (I once knew a Navy psychologist who always referred to anything pork as "filthy pig.")

It's all good. Even food that has been ritually offered to idols. Since the idols represent gods that don't exist (only our God is God), then their dedication as offerings is meaningless, and we are free to gorge away.

But there is an important exception: those for whom such freedom is just too much to bear. And so, Paul argues that if you feel such behavior is wrong, you ought to tolerate those who find it of no consequence – and, by the same token, those who really don't care where the food came from should have tolerance and even make accommodation for those who are squeamish.

That, my friends, is a recipe for controversy, and a controversy it has been and probably will be until Jesus returns.

But the larger issue that Paul is trying to get across is that this mutual forbearance and respect for freedom applies not just to food, but to all things.

How many of you have never broken one of the Ten Commandments? I'd better not see any hands, because we all have. Paul would argue that, too; and would argue for a number of regulations which we totally ignore (I don't see a single hat out there on any of the ladies...) and others which we feel are precious. So, who tolerates whom? Paul writes in those last three sentences: "People are blessed who don't convict themselves by the things they approve. But those who have doubts are convicted if they go ahead and eat, because they aren't acting on the basis of faith. Everything that isn't based on faith is sin." (vv 22a-23)

The hedgehog is a curious creature. Most of us are more familiar with, perhaps even experienced the odd porcupine or two; hedgehogs are smaller, with thicker spines that aren't barbed and don't pull out. They're not aggressive, either, and can be quite gentle and loving. Their highest cute-factor, though, is how they roll up into a spiny ball to present an attacker with a mouthful of prickles. Even cuter, their spines are hollow, like deer hair, so that if you take one that's rolled up and put it in water, it'll float, looking for all the world like some bizarre Irish coracle.

There's a legend about the hedgehog. It seems that when they were first created, and multiplied (very carefully), it was warm. But when winter came, they encountered a real problem: to get close enough to each other to share body heat, they pricked each other, and it hurt. The worst part of this was that if they stayed far enough away from each other to avoid getting hurt, they froze.

And so, they reached a compromise, even if it wasn't perfect: they learned to put up with the odd stick or prick in order to stay close enough together to survive.

That, friends, is the church. Each one of us is full of little prickly bits, some that sting, some that are so sharp that they slash deep before the victim is aware they've been hurt. And each of us can, will, and does inevitably stick others, if not everyone else.

But, at the same time, we know, our hearts know, our souls know that we can only find eternal life, true survival, within this cold, frozen, prickly forest we call the world, then we have to stay close in the church, whose beating heart is the warmth of Jesus Christ. We go out alone, we freeze and die. We stay in, sometimes we get hurt. But we live.

So, which you gonna do?