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**Same, But Different** – Romans 14:1-12

Let me begin with a disclaimer: Paul never met Diane, our token Pastor of Vegetarianism, or he would never have considered saying that those who “are weak in faith” only eat vegetables.

But Paul *is* writing to the church forming in Rome, writing to a whole community of people he’s never met. And so he’s also trying to cram as much into this one communication as he possibly can – we’re dropping right down into the middle of his argument, which doesn’t make things easier for us.

Plus, he’s in the middle of an involved exposition about how the Jewish Law applies to Christians – an argument that had been going on for years, and continues to rage. He’s talking to people he doesn’t know – they are different! – about something different: the Gospel he has received.

What he’s trying to say is that much traditional Jewish observance has been made obsolete by Christ, much like those archaic laws that pop

up every now and then in news stories today – like anyone driving a car within town limits must have a person walking in front to warn people about what’s coming and keep from scaring horses!

Even though we’re dropping into a presentation that is really clearest starting at the beginning and working right through to the end – it is, really, one piece – this section is considered by many to be the climax of Paul’s anxieties about the believers in Rome.

There are those who are holding to Jewish practice, and there are those who consider themselves liberated from the restrictions of circumcision and the fine points of the Law. And they have separated themselves into factions, each claiming the others are an embarrassment to true believers. They believe they are different from each other – and that each of the different variations of *their* Gospel is correct.

Paul, having lived through these controversies all of his Christian life, is on familiar ground. He is the main force taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ out beyond the homeland of Jerusalem and Israel into the rest of the world. And while the message of Jesus is news, thanks to the various exiles the Hebrew people suffered as well as people doing business and looking for better lives, there were pockets of practicing Jews in most cities.

So, no matter where he went, he attracted people who knew nothing about the God of Israel, and those who were active followers.

Talk about diversity in the congregation! You've got some who need the very basics, where Paul is working like the missionaries of the last couple of hundred years, trying to figure out how to communicate the good news in some way they can understand – think of Paul's great sermon in Athens, recorded in the Book of Acts.

On the other hand, there are those who he has to approach as one who knows the prophecies of old, the Law in its finest detail, showing them, as the risen Christ did for the disciples walking the road to Emmaus: starting with the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures and working right through to the end, demonstrating that the Messiah had to come and do what Jesus himself had done.

For those of you teachers out there, you may have experienced this, but it's like getting a busload of refugees who can't speak English dumped into your gifted class. There's going to be a lot of work, suffering, and – to put it mildly – growing pains!

But Paul is telling the Romans that these things are, in truth, incidental. First, he says, welcome them. That's the first step in building any relationship: welcome, hospitality. But he's quick to follow that by saying that you welcome them not because you get a chance to talk down to them, or make fun – even point out how different they are, but welcome them because even though they give every appearance of being completely different from you, they are, in fact, the

same: all human beings, creations of God, all people to whom God is offering redemption, transformed and eternal life.

It's not the differences; it's the similarities. They are, like it or not, the same.

Paul's whole theme in this letter is simple: all who believe are one body in Christ. Just like that water I keep talking about: in Christ, in baptism, we are all made one. Not made the same, mind you; but one.

One of the ways that Paul makes his point would have been very clear to his audience, but not so much to us: he asks, "who are you to judge someone else's servants?" What he means is, anyone who has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior has become a servant of Christ – Paul even says in other places, a slave of Christ.

If each of these differing groups have that belief, that central heart-of-the-matter commitment, have placed themselves at Christ's feet and vowed to be his servant, then, Paul asks, who is any one of you to say what that servant is doing is wrong? It's that one's master who has the power and authority to judge, because the primary relationship is between that servant and Christ.

Carla once again worked her special talents on our bulletin this morning. She came up with a couple of ideas after reading the lesson and my title, but they weren't quite right. I had in mind something like the classic Chinese symbol of yin and yang – two sort of tear drops

circling around a center with opposite colors: the same, but different. Instead, look what she found!

You don't look like you. Thankfully, no one else looks like me. Each of us is built of different life experiences and has a carefully individualized relationship and experience of God and Christ – and that's exactly how God intended it. It may be easier to all be going in one direction, but it's not how we were made, and it makes us all richer, deeper, more complete children of God. Can you imagine hearing the same story at the dinner table from everyone there every time you sat down?

But this kind of unity in Christ will only happen if we lovingly welcome each other – even if we don't socialize outside this community of faith. Welcome each other with our cultural differences – some from Maine, others from Alaska, many who have spent long periods outside the US – others who don't dress, sound, or act like the folks we're used to, or even comfortable with.

We gather together here every week to worship God, not to pick each other apart. We will each “give an account of ourselves to God” as Paul reminds us: will that mean spending time smiling and listening to an opinion or belief with which we deeply disagree; putting up with someone we'd never even see outside of these walls; hearing things that might even trip us into frustration and anger?

Yup. As we've heard in so many memorial services, but is really about living together in Christ: "If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to God."

The great preacher and now President of Princeton Theological Seminary, Craig Barnes, writes: "That means that God's community stands over against the divided communities of our society that clump rich folks here and poor folks there, people of this color here and people of that color there, conservative religious people here and all the sinful Samaritans way over there, where they can't defile us. The neighborhood of God includes only one group of people: those in need of mercy."

So we are alike, the same in our differences, but sharing a common need. We are not to judge how another works through that need through Christ, because that is not our place – we just do, for the Lord.