“Accept One Another”

This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather Wigdahl on Wednesday, March 15, 2012.

Romans 14 (The Message Translation)

Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don’t agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience.

What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.

So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in Scripture:

"As I live and breathe," God says,

"every knee will bow before me;
Every tongue will tell the honest truth
that I and only I am God."

So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

Forget about deciding what's right for each other. Here's what you need to be concerned about: that you don't get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is. I'm convinced—Jesus convinced me!—that everything as it is in itself is holy.

God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake. It's what God does with your life as God sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy. Your task is to single-mindedly serve Christ. Do that, and you’ll please God and serve well, those around you.

L: Word of God, Word of Life. C: Thanks be to God.

Grace and peace to you all in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.
I am reminded of an issue of National Geographic that included a photograph of the fossil remains of 2 saber-tooth tigers, locked in combat with this caption, “One had bitten deep into the leg bone of the other, a thrust that trapped both in a common fate.”

The cause of death is clear: Bent on destroying each other, they destroyed themselves. Thank goodness for evolution, right?—thank goodness this doesn’t happen in our world today. Thank goodness, that we never seek to destroy or denounce or disprove another for our own ego or self-justification. Thank goodness, right? And apparently, this kind of behavior was of no concern to the early church, either.

As Paul once said, “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” Wait a minute…that does sound oddly like our fossilized tigers, doesn’t it? I guess there is something to learn from their fate, after all.

We live in a culture that’s polarized in many ways. We divide ourselves and draw lines in the sand. We point fingers and judge those who think or act differently. This behavior is often even more pronounced in the church. Did you know likely thousands of different Christian denominations in the world? AS Christians, we have different ideas about who God is; we hear parts of our scripture differently; we interpret who God is calling us to be, differently, too. What does it mean for us to accept one another, in light of all we DON’T share in common?

To “accept” means “to receive kindly, to take to oneself.” To accept one another, isn’t just about putting up with each other, it’s about extending welcome; a warm welcome, not a cold shoulder. That can be hard to do, depending on whom the “another” is, that we’re encountering.

We can get pretty…dare I say, “catty?” As Christians, we believe we are created in God’s image, but often we behave like we need to be created in one another’s image.

Truly accepting one another, means we must learn to value, NOT just what we have in common, but also, and especially, the things that make us different. Unity, in Christ, does not mean Uniformity among us.

**Unity does not mean uniformity!** There are a lot of differences, in those thousands of denominations; for heaven’s sake, there are differences between Lutherans and Lutherans, right? And there are differences among us: just because we belong to the same congregation, it doesn’t mean that we are all exactly alike—I mean, seriously, look around!

We don’t all think alike or look alike or live alike. In fact, there are things about which we strongly disagree—of that I’m certain. But here we are, called together to be the Body of Christ; to get along, and more than that, TO WORK TOGETHER.

THAT’S the bigger picture I think Paul is lifting up, through that great Message translation of his words: Paul says, that even in our disagreements, in our differences: the heart of the gospel—the love and hope of Christ IS and ALWAYS will be, our center.

**And when we find that center** for ourselves—when we are planted in that center, we will be better at treating one another with more of that same love and hope too.
When Paul wrote his letter to Christian churches in Rome, the hot taboo of the day was eating meat that had possibly been offered to idols, in Roman worship. See, only a portion of the meat was used for the actual sacrifice; the rest was cut up and sold at the marketplace. Some Christians felt free to buy that meat and eat it (believing, that meat is meat, and there is no difference), while others believed it was wrong (thinking that to eat it, was in effect, associating with idol worship).

The meat-eaters and non-meat-eaters could not agree; they were at each other’s throats. The problem was not really meat problem, of course. It was an acceptance problem.

Paul tells the non-meat eaters to accept and not judge those who eat meat. And he tells the meat-eaters to accept and not look down on those who don’t. Paul says, accept one another. And don’t flaunt your decision as a way of shaming the other, either.

For us, all of this is fairly easy to swallow (pardon the pun) as long as we stay on the issue of eating meat offered to idols. But what if we change the topic? What if instead, we imagine Paul was talking about politics? Or Sexuality? Or really weird body piercings, or abortion, or drinking alcohol...Not all Christians are on the same page about these things. Might we need to be reminded of OUR Center in Christ?

And how DO we live out our values—while at the same, respecting and welcoming and accepting the one anothers in our midst, who might see and do so differently?

I don’t know—it’s not near so easy as eating or not eating meat, at least for me. When I get stuck wanting to fight about such things—and I am all for a good theological debate—but when I get stuck wanting to fight a little too much, it helps me to remember, that:

Unity does not mean uniformity. The longer I have the privilege of being a pastor the more I see how such diversity actually becomes a great strength and blessing. When we allow ourselves to really listen first, instead of immediately jumping to judgment—that’s when we learn something. We learn something we would not have known on our own. The gift of diversity is often a catalyst for growth and change.

I have a powerful memory while abroad during seminary, of climbing Mt. Sinai, the mountain where Moses first received the law: the ten commandments. No one is can be certain of where the Mount Sinai of the Bible is located, but tradition suggests it’s the one here, on the south Sinai Peninsula.

Climbing Mt. Sinai is a pilgrimage for many: Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike all find their roots in the story of Abraham—so this place: Mt. Sinai, is a HOLY place for them all. People from all over the world climb this mountain in darkness in order to reach the top by sunrise.

The group I was traveling with, departed at 2am, after a very late dinner with shepherd in the middle of the desert (but that’s another story). Anyway, we started climbing, in complete darkness. We reached the top a couple hours later—and watched as others slowing and rather quietly arrived too. Soon we were surrounded by Japanese Christians, local Muslims, Jews from around the world...all together in this one place, this holy place for all of us.
As the sun began to appear over the horizon, out from the silence, there came this soft humming...eventually it rose to singing, different songs in different languages, all songs of worship, awe, praise.

In spite of all of our differences—we were connected in something that was bigger than any one of us. Our “religions” were different, but our God was the same. And in that moment, we found our shared center: in the heart of our creator.

**Unity does not mean uniformity.** Thank God, for our differences can be our greatest blessings. The next time you feel particular challenged by “another” in your life, try to remember that maybe, just maybe, you have something to learn. And if nothing else, remember Paul’s words for us:

Forget about deciding what's right for each other. Here's what you need to be concerned about: that you don't get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is. I'm convinced—Jesus convinced me!—that everything as it is in itself is holy.

God's kingdom isn't about trivial things. It's what God does with your life as God sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy. Your task is to single-mindedly serve Christ. Do that, and you’ll please God and serve well, those around you.”

Accept one another, in the grace God, as God accepts you. Amen.