

Sermon for The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Date: November 22, 2020

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Genesis 50:15-21

Epistle Reading: Romans 14:1-12

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21-25

Sermon Text: Romans 14:1-12

Sermon Title: We Live in Light of Christ's Eternal Rule



Introit: Psalm 39:4–5a, 7–8, 12; antiphon: 2 Peter 3:13 NIV

Hymns:

LSB 816 – From All that Dwells Below the Skies

LSB 818 – In Thee is Gladness

LSB 685 – Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus

Songs:

Father I Adore you

Broken Things

By Our Love

Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive

Liturgy:

Divine Service IV, p. 203

Liturgy:

Creative Worship



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Text: Romans 14:1–12

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

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Grace to you, and peace, in Jesus' Holy Name. Amen.

Introduction:

Today, Paul's words to us are strange. He joins two very different things together. In just a few short verses, Paul moves from talking about food to talking about the return of Christ.

Paul begins by talking about eating. Some Christians in Rome were eating only vegetables and others were eating anything. It seems there was an argument about whether or not Roman Christians should keep Old Testament food laws. Could they eat meat that was not kosher?¹

Then, in just a few verses, Paul moves from something insignificant to something much larger and eternal. He reminds then and us we all will stand before the Judgment throne of Christ. We will give an account. Paul wants our vision to expand, to see the return of Christ and the Last Judgment. What does eating have to do with the Judgment on the Last Day? For Paul, the return of Jesus is not something distant from God's people. It is woven into the fabric of daily life.

I. First Focus: God has woven our daily lives into his loving rule.

In 1306, an artist depicted this reality. In Padua, Italy, Giotto Di Bondone painted the walls of a church. The church is called the Arena Chapel, because it was built on land that stood next to a Roman arena. When you enter the chapel, you are surrounded by paintings, that tell the story of God, and His plan for our salvation, on the walls. Three levels of paintings. While all the images are beautiful, I want you to focus your attention on what happens when you leave the chapel.

In this chapel the entire back wall is covered with a mural. A picture of the return of Christ. There He is seated in the center, the largest of all the figures, surrounded by a halo of light. His left hand grasps at the edge of the halo as if he is about to enter into our world. He is returning in judgment. Dividing the sheep and the goats. As you walk out of the chapel, you are reminded that the world you live in is not your own. You are part of God's Kingdom and Christ is returning in glory to judge the living and the dead.

1 Genesis 9:1-3; Mark 7:18-19 – *(In these verses God has declared all things as fitting for food.)*

Whatever your plans for the day, the artist wants you to see them through the eyes of Jesus. Your daily life is woven into His kingdom and everything you do, eating or sleeping, working or playing, is ruled by God.

Paul writes:

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we died to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.²

In Holy Baptism, God has claimed you as His own. He has joined you to Christ, who has risen and ascended, and promises to come again. You are His. Your daily life has been woven into His Kingdom and His loving rule. Paul, like this artist, wants you to see this. Everything is about saving souls, yours and others'.

II. Second Focus: We can forget about the loving rule of God.

This is a truth we all too often forget. In the corner of the painting there is a terrifying vision of Hell. Demons are torturing people and you can see the figure of Death, seated and devouring everyone on whom he can get his hands. Even more terrifying is the one small figure of a lone man, journeying, with a bag on his back. He is not terrified. He is just walking toward Death. He is taking his time, led naively, by demons, to the pit of Hell. There is always the danger we will forget we live in God's Kingdom, and end up on the road that leads to destruction.³

In the Gospel reading Jesus gives us a picture of this very thing. It is hidden in the background of a parable. Jesus contrasts two kingdoms: the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. In the Kingdom of God, all debts are forgiven. In the kingdom of the world, all debts must be paid.

A servant is brought before his master in fear and trembling. He comes with fear because he lives in the kingdom of the world. A talent was worth about 20 years of labor, ten thousand talents was worth 200,000 years of daily labor. A debt no one could ever repay. His wife and his children could be sold into slavery, his life ruined.

The master, however, lives in a different Kingdom. A Kingdom where debts are forgiven. In mercy he forgives the debt. That moment of forgiveness is not just a transaction. It is an invitation. An invitation by the master to live in a new

² Romans 14:7-8

³ Matthew 7:13-14

Kingdom. The master invites his servant to live in a world where debts are forgiven.

If you follow the remainder of the parable you learn the servant leaves he forgets that he lives in this new Kingdom. Coming across someone who owes him a little and he demands it all. Without knowing it, this servant has walked into prison, choosing to live in a kingdom where everyone pays their debt. Now he will suffer in prison.

With this parable Jesus is inviting us to live in God's Kingdom, a Kingdom where debts are forgiven, sins are paid for, not by your own hard work, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God has opened the door for all of us to live in this Kingdom. How often do we, like the foolish servant, choose to live in a kingdom where people have to pay.

God's people in Rome have all been forgiven in Christ. God has brought them to new life and they live in Christ's eternal Kingdom. That Kingdom should change how they live with each other. ... and they are fighting over food. Those who think they are strong in faith are despising those whom they deem as weak. God's Church is being divided, broken apart, filled with gossip, lies, sin and disdain for simple human decency, despising and passing judgment judgment rather than forgiveness and love. God has saved us all in His work of dying love, and yet that love is dying. They no longer see it. They no longer live it. They live as though the hate it.

Such foolishness didn't end in the first century. It continues today. The Church has long remembered the death of the saints. Many of them were martyred, stand even to death, on the Word and work of Jesus. Killed by the world as they bore witness to the faith and love of God. In their death, we see the dying love of Christ. Sometimes, on their shields, you will find the instrument of their death. So, for St. Peter, you have a cross, turned upside down. For James the Less, you have a saw. Tradition holds that at age 96 he was pushed off the roof of the Temple in Jerusalem and surviving that, he was clubbed to death and his body sawn in pieces. The Church remembers these saints and the means and method of their death, as they died in conflict with the kingdom of the world.

Even more sad is not all Christians are martyred outside the Church. These martyrs of the faith, martyred in their own congregations. They are there because we have a way of killing our own, and then burying them in the records of the Church. People who were once active in the Church quit coming, and no one asks why. If you to asked them, they could tell you why. They have stories of battles they fought around them. Over their heads, we could place the instruments of their

death, sin. Often things as inconsequential as eating vegetables or meat, but the damage that is done, the division of Christ's Church, the way in which God's people turn away from His rule of love, is huge and can lead into people to turn away from God for eternity.

This is where Paul wants us focus our attention. This is a concern that still confronts the Church today. How do we live with one another? Do we receive one another as people for whom Christ died? Do we live in the love of God that has brought us into His Kingdom, and will lead us all to eternal life with Him?

III. Third Focus: God forgives us in Christ and invites us to love one another in Him.

We can and should be thankful because God Himself comes among us and forgives our sins in Jesus. As the apostle Paul writes:

To this end Christ died and lived again,
that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.⁴

When Jesus entered this world, He came in humility. He gathered to Himself those who had accumulated great debt. Tax collectors who were stealing from God's people, women who had sold their bodies. Those who had wandered far from God's ways, and were living in a distant country of debt, unable to set themselves free. These are the ones that Jesus gathered to Himself and these are the ones for whom Jesus died. Those who are the "wrong color" or from the "wrong family" or the "wrong side of town."

Though He had no debt of His own, Jesus used His priceless life as payment for their sin. A lack of love for them condemns you. A willingness to judge and despise those for whom Christ died condemns you. These sins, all sins, were laid on Jesus and He died to pay that costly debt.

Today, Paul proclaims this wonderful truth among us. Jesus Christ died and lives again, so that you may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom. That He would be Lord of the living and the dead. We who have been Baptized into Jesus have been Baptized into His death. Our lives are His and His Kingdom is ours. His Kingdom is eternal, established in the heavens, and no one on this earth can ever take it away.

This is the Kingdom Jesus describes in a parable. This is the Kingdom in which Joseph, by faith, lived, in the Old Testament readings. When Joseph's brothers

4 Romans 14:9

came before him, they knew that they had sinned, against him. They had sold him into slavery. They lied to their father, acting as if Joseph were dead to them. Then they lie to Joseph, telling him something their father never said, hoping to save themselves. There they are, on their knees bathed in more lies, hoping to live by a lie they put on their dead father's lips.

Joseph knows of their sin, their deception, and their lies. Joseph rules over the people of Egypt, second in authority only to Pharaoh himself. He could have them sold into slavery. He could banish them from his sight. He could rule over them in vengeance, and yet he chooses to rule over them in love.

They try to live by a lie, Joseph invites them to live by the truth that comes from mouth of God. Joseph lives by love not hate. Doing that, he invites them into a different Kingdom, a Kingdom greater than Egypt. A Kingdom ruled by One greater than Pharaoh. Joseph invites them to live in the Kingdom of God. There sins are forgiven and God's people live with one another in love. He says:

Do not fear, I will provide for you and your little ones.⁵

Jesus foretells this Kingdom in a parable. Joseph foreshadows this Kingdom in love to his brothers. Paul proclaims this Kingdom in Christ for all people. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has brought us into His Kingdom.

What does that look like? Look at the painting. There you can see Jesus is center. He hangs there, surrounded by light, about to break through and enter this world. Until that day we need to serve as His people. Not hid in our sin. We must leave this building and walk into the world of darkness with the saving Light of Christ.

The artist strategically placed a symbol over the door that leads out of the chapel and into the world. Everyone who leaves that chapel does so only by walking under the cross, inviting them to live by faith.

Christ Jesus rules over all, and there will be a day when everyone sees it. He will return to judge the living and the dead. On that day, He will fulfill His promise and raise the faithful live with Him. Until that time we live by faith in this One who shows us undeserved love. Jesus may not appear in the heavens right now to reveal His rule, He does appear in small ways on this earth, through the lives of His people. God's people reveal Jesus' rule by living in this world in self-sacrificing love.

Whether the Christians in Rome are leaving their churches, the family of Enrico Scrovegni is leaving the chapel, or we are leaving this church today, we do

5 Genesis 50:21

so only and always by grace. God's grace. Our lives should be part of God's loving Kingdom. We should daily realize the moments where we can reveal to others the forgiving love of Jesus. Not only in how we treat one another, but in how we treat others in the world.

Conclusion:

Throughout this series the apostle Paul has told us God's Greater Story. God the Father sent His Son Jesus to live, die, and rise again to forgive all sins. Ascended into heaven, Jesus now rules at the right hand of His Father. He sends His Holy Spirit to dwell in us. God, the Holy Spirit, through Holy Baptism, brings us to Jesus. Jesus then brings us, forgiven, to His Father, and the Father makes us part of the people of God. We live no longer by ourselves, but as God's holy people. We live now no longer for ourselves but for the purposes of God.

God has a greater plan for you. It is not bathed in deception, gossip and the destruction of others. God's plan is that you live in Light of Christ's eternal rule. He gathers you to hear His Word. He offers you Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, and He sends you out to share His love in your daily life with others.

God has woven you into His Kingdom and your daily life is part of His loving rule. To the repentant and faithful, whether you live or die, you are the Lord's. The day will come. The day when Jesus will come and bring about a new creation, for all who trust and hope in Him. Until that day, in life and in death, we say "To this God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory forever and ever.

In Jesus' name.

Amen."

**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**

