

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, FALLS CHURCH, VA

SERVICE OF WORD AND PRAYER



PRELUDE *Come Down, O Love Divine* Setting: Mark Sedio

WELCOME

ENTRANCE HYMN #501 *Come Down, O Love Divine*

- 1 **Come down, O Love divine;
Seek Thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with Thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near;
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.**

- 2 **O let it freely burn,
Till worldly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let Thy glorious light
Shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.**

- 3 **Let holy charity
Mine outward vesture be
And lowliness become mine inner clothing—
True lowliness of heart,
Which takes the humbler part,
And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.**

- 4 **And so the yearning strong,
With which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the pow'r of human telling;
No soul can guess His grace
Till it become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling.**

CONFESSIO AND ABSOLUTION

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all righteousness.

(Silence for reflection and self-examination)

Let us then confess our sins to God our Father.

Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name. Amen.

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for His sake God forgives us all our sins. To those who believe in Jesus Christ He gives the power to become the children of God and bestows on them the Holy Spirit. May the Lord, who has begun this good work in us, bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

KYRIE

In peace let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace from above and for our salvation let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For this holy house and for all who offer here their worship and praise let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

Help, save, comfort, and defend us, gracious Lord.

Amen.

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth.

Lord God, heavenly king, almighty God and Father:

We worship You, we give You thanks, we praise You for Your glory.

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God:

You take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.

You are seated at the right hand of the Father; receive our prayer.

For You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord,

You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,

in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

THE PRAYER OF THE DAY

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray. O God, our refuge and strength, the author of all godliness,

hear the devout prayers of Your Church, especially in times of persecution, and grant that what we ask in faith we may obtain; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



FIRST LESSON Genesis 50:15–21

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM 103:1–12

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
 and all that is within me,
 bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
 and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
 who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
 who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works righteousness
 and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
 his acts to the people of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide,
 nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
 and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning,
 is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

SECOND LESSON Matthew 18:21–35

Peter came up and said to [Jesus], “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

CHILDREN’S SERMON

ALLELUIA VERSE

Alleluia. Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life.

Alleluia, alleluia.

SERMON 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Praise to You, O Christ

SERMON

Romans 14:1-12; also Genesis 50:15-21 and Matthew 18:21-35

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ:

Today is now the 14th Sunday in a row where we have read from Paul's letter to the Romans. I do hope you've enjoyed our examination of this great book. In this letter, Paul beautifully shares the essentials of the Christian faith – going into much detail in order to do so thoroughly, accurately and clearly.

We've now come to the 14th chapter. And as we get started, let me give you a very quick summary of where we've been. In the first eight chapters of the book, Paul gives a theological presentation of the faith. He begins by addressing the sinfulness of humanity and then, in chapter three, telling of God's remedy for sin. This remedy, he explains, is the righteousness that is given to us by Jesus Christ – a righteousness that comes by faith and is not earned by any good work on our part. The rest of the section tells how this righteousness is given to us and how it endures in us even in our struggles.

The second half of the letter, beginning in chapter nine, tells us how we are to live in the faith. The first chapters help us understand God's promise to the Jews in light of the appearance of the Messiah. Chapter 12 gives a general description of Christian character. Chapter 13 tells of the Christian's attitude toward government authority. And that leads us to chapter 14, our text for today, where Paul is ready to address another practical concern of the Christian life.

Paul's concern in this chapter is for good relationships among Christians even as they practice their faith in different ways. He wants them to get along. And appreciate each other.

We don't know whether or not Paul had actually heard of disagreements among the Roman Christians or whether he was just anticipating them. By this point Paul is very aware of the touch points. He's addressed them with other communities. Regardless of what he may have heard from Rome, Paul knows that practicing the faith is always an issue for Christians.

The specific issues he mentions are the question of what foods to eat and which days to observe as holy. But the issues are only so important here because Paul gives principles that could apply to any issue. And for this we are thankful – for we tend to make issues out of a lot of things.

Paul begins by saying: "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." Here we see Paul's urging of the people not to quarrel, and especially over those things that are "opinions" – meaning those issues that are not matters of right or wrong – what some translations call "disputable matters."

Paul's two examples – of foods to eat and days to observe – are both matters that are open to debate. Christians can hold different opinions regarding them. With food, Christians can either restrict their diet to certain things, as a means of discipline or making a point, or they can eat all things. Christians live in that freedom. The same goes with observing days of holiness. Some will want to mark out certain days as holy, observing them as such, while others will decide not to do this. The decision is to be made in Christian freedom.

This teaching of Paul's is based on that of Jesus, who addressed the subject many times. It is a freedom that is quite distinct from the Jewish faith as it was taught at the time and is indeed quite different from most religious observance commonly found in the world.

Paul's chief concern here is that people who make different choices regarding these matters not pass judgment on one another. "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" he says. "It is before his own master that one stands or falls." We all answer to God ourselves.

Paul is teaching a tolerance of different forms of practicing the faith.

That being said, Paul also knows that some forms can be harmful. You may recall that when Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians about the issue of Christian practices, he came down hard on one side. There, those who promoted the practicing of the faith according to the old standards of the Jewish law were condemned, for they were relying on those works as a source of their salvation and downplaying the freedom that Jesus had taught.

As one reads through Paul's instruction in Romans 14, one might be a little uneasy with the labels he uses for the two sides. Paul says that those who practice the faith in one way are "weak," while those who practice it in another way are "strong."

No one wants to be called weak. We want to be strong.

A few Sundays ago, we heard Jesus chide Peter for his "little faith." Peter had seen the wind and waves and doubted what Jesus told him. Peter was weak. And then, the very next Sunday, we heard Jesus compliment a woman for her "great faith." The woman, who persisted in pursuing Jesus' help, was strong. The two stories certainly point us to the blessings of a strong faith and not a weak one. And yet, in the stories we also see that Jesus loved both people. Both had faith.

Here in Romans, the weak are those who make more rules for themselves. They only eat certain things, abstaining from others. And they designate many days as holy, rather than just a few or none at all.

Paul's language implies that it's because of weak faith that these extra practices are needed. We see his point. The strong can live with more freedom. They don't need all the extra reminders.

And yet, let us be careful with this distinction.

While there are good reasons to strive for being strong, there is also wisdom in admitting one's weakness. In fact, both Paul and Jesus did that consistently. "When I am weak, then I am strong," Paul said to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:10). Jesus' version of this is his command that we humble ourselves and his promise that the last shall be first.

The following of extra practices or rules can be seen positively – as a way of being more disciplined about one's faith.

We all need discipline. And we all need certain practices to reinforce it. That's why Christians continue to teach the observance of the Sabbath – at least as Jesus taught it. And it's why the writer of the Book of Hebrews tells us not to give up meeting together. And it's why Paul gives many, many warnings against walking according to the desires of the flesh.

Freedom is a good thing. But it can be dangerous too. Paul said to the Galatians: "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh" (Gal. 5:13). Peter warned against "using your freedom as a cover-up for evil" (1 Peter 2:16). We dare not overestimate our strength.

As Paul continues his argument in Romans 14, he encourages us to honor the Lord in our own way. And then he reminds us that “none of us lives to himself.” This is Paul’s way of saying we are connected to the Lord. We live for him. The statement is very similar to the one he said to the Corinthians: “[Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15).

When we live for the Lord, our lives have purpose. They are meaningful. We are a part of God’s kingdom, with kingdom work to be done.

Knowing this, let us then discipline ourselves that we may carry out our work faithfully. And let us at the same time be energized and encouraged in our work too, by knowing Christ has set us free from having to justify ourselves.

None of us lives to himself. We live to God. And... we live to others. This means we will be understanding when someone decides to take on more disciplines for themselves than we would. And it means we will be understanding when someone decides to take on less disciplines for themselves. And it means we will sometimes conform our choices for the sake of unity and togetherness too. Paul will talk about this as he continues to speak on the subject through the rest of chapter 14 and into the beginning verses of chapter 15. As we see from the extended discussion here, there is much for us to consider as we think about practicing our faith together as Christians.

None of us lives to himself. And, says Paul, 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.” Here Paul inserts some thinking about the life to come, as he often does.

Paul does this as a needed dose of reality, for we often feel as if our debates and disputes are matters of life and death. We worry that our church or our family or even our own lives won’t survive if things aren’t done a certain way. Paul reminds us that the Christian life is bigger than what we see here. Death for a Christian is not an end but simply a gate to the greater life. Whether we live or die we are the Lord’s. We belong to him.

And if we can’t see that the good news of salvation should move us to see things with eyes of faith, then Paul reminds us that death brings with it a judgment as well. He tells us very directly that “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” ... and “each of us will give an account of himself.” Therefore, he says, “do not pass judgment on your brother” and “do not despise him.”

As we think about Paul’s teaching today, we should each do a little reflecting on our reactions to other believers. What kind of practices of your brother trouble you? What kind of practices worry you or maybe even set you off?

Is it your brother’s worship style? Is it his need to be very careful or very flamboyant? Is it his manner of speaking? His need for simplicity or complexity? His desire for repetition or variety? His gifts or lack of them?

In a world where people are constantly telling us we can have it our way, because they know that is what we want to hear, Paul reminds us that we need to work together. And in a world where people seem to value the witty putdown, the clever critique and the mighty slam over words of kindness and understanding, Paul reminds us that we need to appreciate one another.

Today is our last Sunday of reading from Romans. This sermon series is now over. Hopefully the lessons we’ve covered will stay with us.

As we think about applying their truths to our lives of faith, let me conclude by quickly summarizing the last two chapters – for the point they make is directly related to what we have learned today.

In the last half of chapter 15, Paul speaks to the unity between Jew and Gentile – a very significant coming together that he felt compelled to explain in almost all of his letters. Christ makes this unity possible, and it is to be cherished.

And then, in chapter 16, he gives a long list of personal greetings to individual people. To some he adds a little comment. Others he simply lists. The meaning is obvious – the Christian faith is about caring for people. God cares for us in Christ. We are to care for one another.

Paul then closes with a doxological blessing. And that will be our closing too.

“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

HYMN OF THE DAY #845 Where Charity and Love Prevail

- 1 Where charity and love prevail
There God is ever found;
Brought here together by Christ's love
By love are we thus bound.**
- 2 With grateful joy and holy fear
His charity we learn;
Let us with heart and mind and soul
Now love Him in return.**
- 3 Forgive we now each other's faults
As we our faults confess,
And let us love each other well
In Christian holiness.**
- 4 Let strife among us be unknown;
Let all contention cease;
Be God's the glory that we seek;
Be ours His holy peace.**
- 5 Let us recall that in our midst
Dwells Christ, His only Son;
As members of His body joined
We are in Him made one.**
- 6 For love excludes no race or clan
That names the Savior's name;
His family embraces all
Whose Father is the same.**

APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

OFFERING *Where Charity and Love Prevail* Setting: Charles Callahan

PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Brief silence

Almighty God, as once You kept Joseph from evil and brought good from his suffering in Egypt, deliver us by Your grace so that we may learn patience in trials. Teach us to be slow to judge, quick to forgive, and steadfast in love for You and for one another. Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Merciful Lord, You have shown great compassion to us; teach us to show such compassion to others, that we may welcome the stranger, love our neighbor in need, and be attentive to those new to the faith or vulnerable to temptation. Help us to serve the refugee seeking safety, and give us opportunity to share Your gifts with those who live in poverty and want. Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Gracious God, bless those who preach and teach Your Word, and give the hearers willing ears to hear and willing hearts to learn the Scriptures well. Bless those now training to be pastors and church workers. Grant to all the baptized the aid of Your Holy Spirit so that, receiving Your Gospel with joy, we may share it freely with those outside the household of faith. Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Mighty God, give wisdom and courage to our elected and appointed leaders, that they may pursue justice, seek peace and protect life from its natural beginning to its natural end. Bring an end to the threats of terror and violence among the peoples, and open all nations to the voice of Your Word. Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Holy Lord, lead us to pursue reconciliation, that we may stand before You forgiven and united in faith. Give us unity of doctrine, and help us to walk together in harmony of life. Prepare us to receive Your own Son's body and blood with faith, and bring to fruition in our lives the precious gift of grace we receive in this communion. Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Blessed Father, You know our weakness of body and soul. Give to the troubled in mind Your peace, to the suffering relief, to the sick healing, to the grieving comfort and deliver the dying into everlasting life. Hear us especially for _____ and also for those named in our hearts. [*Brief silence*] Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Giving Lord, all good things come from You. Open our hearts to be generous with the poor and to bring You the tithes and offerings You are due, that Your Church and all her agencies may serve Your gracious purpose and suffer no lack of people or resources to do the work of Your Kingdom. Lord, in Your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Almighty and everlasting God, deliver us from temptation and the powers of evil, that we may be faithful unto death and receive from Your hand the crown of everlasting life. Whether we live or die, we belong to You, and we pray You to comfort us with this promise, that we may join the company of the saints on the day You have appointed and enter into the heavenly places to worship at Your throne on high; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forevermore.

Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless us and keep us.
The Lord make His face shine on us
and be gracious to us.
The Lord look upon us with favor and ✠ give us peace.

SENDING HYMN #719 I Leave All Things to God's Direction

**1 I leave all things to God's direction;
He loves me both in joy and woe.
His will is good, sure His affection;
His tender love is true, I know.
My fortress and my rock is He:
What pleases God, that pleases me.**

- 2 God knows what must be done to save me;
His love for me will never cease.
Upon His hands He did engrave me
With purest gold of loving grace.
His will supreme must ever be:
What pleases God, that pleases me.**
- 3 My God desires the soul's salvation;
My soul He, too, desires to save.
Therefore with Christian resignation
All earthly troubles I will brave.
His will be done eternally:
What pleases God, that pleases me.**
- 4 My God has all things in His keeping;
He is the ever faithful friend.
He gives me laughter after weeping,
And all His ways in blessings end.
His love endures eternally:
What pleases God, that pleases me.**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

DISMISSAL

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

POSTLUDE *I Leave All Things to God's Direction* Setting: Stephen R. Johnson

Altar Flowers: "For family who live afar during the pandemic and spouses/caretakers of those with cancer." By Ian, Kristen and Oliver C.

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