

Sermon Draft

Text: Romans 14:1–12

Sermon: “Judge Free Zone”

It is a curious thing how multiple children from the same parents can each have such different personalities. This can lead parents either to marvel at the wonder of God’s creation or to pull their hair out in frustration. Many psychologists attribute this to birth order. Are you a firstborn, a middle-born, or the baby of the family? It seems the order in which you’re born into your family is a factor in how you behave. They say firstborn individuals tend to be the leader of the pack, reliable, conscientious, and structured. They may be achievers as well as controlling—just ask any younger sibling. Middle-born children tend to thrive on friendships and be people-pleasers. They may be peacemakers and have larger social circles, and they may be more rebellious as well. Then we come to the last-born, the baby of the family. They tend to be fun-loving and outgoing as they seek attention, but they can also be manipulative and self-centered.

These truly are general observations. Yet even with such differences in personalities, these same children belong to and receive their identity from the same mother and father—a fitting reflection of our life together in the body of Christ, the church: “We are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8).

Our Lord forgives all our iniquity, heals all our diseases, redeems our lives from the pit, and crowns us with steadfast love and mercy. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us for our iniquities, but removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west as we heard in our Psalm.

Such bountiful forgiveness led Joseph to recognize that he was not in the place of God to judge or condemn his brothers and thus he readily forgave their sins (Old Testament Reading). The bountiful forgiveness we receive from God through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, leads us to forgive and be gracious to our fellow Christian not merely seven times but seventy times seven that is, countless times in our life together. Yes, our Lord God wills and calls us to have mercy on our fellow servants just as he has had mercy on us (Gospel).

Since our Lord Jesus Christ has died and lived again, we all, including our brothers and sisters in Christ, belong to him (Epistle).

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the church is no wish dream. In fact, God's grace actually shatters our dreams of a church as a perfect place with perfect people. God calls us to live together in his church not according to our personal dreams of how our fellow Christian should speak and act in matters of Christian freedom, but according to our new identity in him. God is no fan of wish dreams in his church, because such dreaming makes us proud and arrogant.

Such dreaming is also what the apostle Paul confronts in today's Epistle. When one Christian believes he can eat anything meats, veggies, whatever he looks down on the brother in Christ who freely decides to eat only vegetables. He wants his brother to live according to his dream. Then the veggie-only brother shoots back, "Who do you think you are to tell me how to practice my Christian freedom?" Now we have a different dream.

And so it goes. “Who do you think you are to look down on me?” “Who do you think you are to tell me how to live my life?”

Paul’s answer is, ***“I will tell you who you are. You are God’s own dear children, made righteous by Jesus and reborn in your Baptism.”*** When we are tempted to criticize or look down on our neighbor, trying to make her or him fit into our wish dream, we need to remember: Our neighbor belongs to Jesus too!

Our Epistle from Romans 14 teaches us how to deal with debates over Christian freedom in the Christian church. By his suffering, death, and resurrection, our Lord Jesus Christ has made us righteous and set us free from sin, death, and the devil, giving all of us our true identity in him.

Our Lord Jesus Christ himself has fulfilled all of the Old Testament laws of food, drink, and ceremonial days. In the Old Testament, God called certain foods unclean. If you wish to find out more read Leviticus.

But Jesus calls them clean, remember the story of Peter and the sheet being lowered down full of food but Peter considered it unclean and refused to eat, and the Voice said, ***“What God has made clean, do not call common or unclean.”***

In the Old Testament, God established ceremonial days for his people to follow, such as the Sabbath Day, Passover, and other days, but Jesus is the fulfillment of those days in his life, death, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 5:6–8; Colossians 2:16–17). Therefore, the apostle Paul reminds us not to judge one another nor divide the Christian church over matters in which our Lord Jesus Christ had made us free.

When we despise or judge our brother or sister in Christ over matters of Christian freedom (food, drink, festival days, and so on), we are trying to identify ourselves as God over them.

Today’s Old Testament Reading illustrates both the problem and the solution of how God’s redeemed people live together. Joseph’s brothers were afraid that now, after the death of their father Jacob, Joseph would seek revenge.

After all they had sold him into slavery many years earlier hoping to get rid of him once and for all. But Joseph had long ago forgiven them. Joseph comforted his brothers, saying, ***“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?”*** (Genesis 50:19).

God was able to use both the strength (Joseph) and the weakness (his brothers) of his people for his purposes ***“that many people should be kept alive”*** (Genesis 50:20). Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant also illustrates the problem and solution of living together under his forgiveness.

We are again reminded that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ so we should love and care for one another but also forgive as we have been forgiven. There are times for correcting and rebuking as we read in 2nd Timothy 3:16. ***“All Scripture is breathed out of God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”***

But this is done out of love and caring for our fellowman to help him not make ourselves feel mightier or better than them. Whatever we do we should do it out of love.

Even in our Gospel the king forgave the servant's enormous debt. The king had every right to through the servant into prison but out of pity or compassion he chose to forgive. The servant, however, would not forgive his fellow servant the much smaller debt. When the king heard about his lack of compassion, he became very angry and threw the bad servant into prison.

When we pass judgment on our brother or sister in Christ, we wrongly impersonate God himself. We must remember that we will one day stand before our Lord's judgment seat. The bad servant didn't learn from the king's actions and thus lost his freedom. And so often we also forget to follow the example of our King and Savior.

Martin Franzmann wrote on this text: "[God] has made us all brothers in the family of God. Within that family there is no room for passing judgment or for contempt.

Paul fosters faith by bidding men look back upon the cross and resurrection of the Lord” (Martin H. Franzmann, Romans: A Commentary [St. Louis: CPH, 1968], 248).

Both we and our neighbor have a new identity in Jesus Christ, for we each belong to him. By the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, each of us has a new identity. **“We are the Lord’s”** (v 8). Our Baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection makes all of us God’s sons and daughters and thus sets us free from our sins of despising and judging our fellow Christians (6:22).

Who do we think we are? No, we are not God to judge or despise our brother or sister in Christ. Instead, we are God’s own son or daughter, bought by the blood of Jesus and washed by his Word and water. So is our neighbor. Our neighbor belongs to Jesus too. **“We are the Lord’s”**

Amen