

In our New Testament reading from Paul's letter to the Romans today, I could almost hear the complaining from the Romans that Paul was addressing in his letter to them. Take a look at the part Paul's letter to the Romans that we have as our second reading (*see end of sermon for the passage from Romans 14:1-12*)

What do you think the Romans were complaining about for Paul to respond as he does in his letter? (*allow for responses*)

- Some people are weak in faith – they need to work on that
- Some weak people only eat vegetables – no wonder they don't have any energy
- Some people eat when they should abstain. Others should be abstaining and yet they eat.
- Some think all days are alike when they should know that one day is better than another
- Some who observe the day, do not observe it in honor of the Lord.

Ah complaints – present in the earliest of Christian communities. They are very familiar to me and probably to you as well. I do find it comforting that this has been happening 2000 years ago. I believe this is the state of being human and thank goodness for a patient God, because I know that complaining and frustration with one another in Christian community happens.

In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, the heart of the complaining seems to be around criticizing the practices of fellow Christians and it brought to mind a post I put on Facebook a few weeks ago. "A lady went to the Pastor of her church and said... I won't be attending church anymore. He said, may I ask why?? She said, I see people on their cell phones texting and typing during the service, some are gossiping, some just ain't living right, some are sleeping, some are staring at me, they are all just hypocrites..."

The Pastor got silent, and then he said, OK... But can I ask you to do something for me before you make your final decision? She said, sure, what's that? He said, take a glass of water and walk around the Church 2 times and don't let any water fall out the glass. She said, yes I can do that! And went and got the glass of water. She came back and said it's done. Proudly.

He asked her these questions:

1. Did you see anybody on their phone?
2. Did you see anybody gossiping?
3. Was anybody living wrong?
4. Did you see anyone sleeping?

She said, I didn't see anything because I was so focused on this glass, so the water wouldn't fall. He told her, when you come to church, you should be just that focused on God, so that YOU don't fall. THAT'S WHY JESUS SAID "FOLLOW ME,"!!! He did not say follow Christians. Don't let your relationship with God be determined by how others relate with God. Let it be determined by how focused you are with God."

This is a hard balance indeed – to walk with those in faith whose faith is at a very different stage than ours or to be with those who have are practicing their faith in ways that you do not agree with. How do we not get into a place where we are constantly judging and complaining about each other?

One of the communities outside the church that does a great job with these issues is CrossFit – a way of working out that engages the whole body – that focuses on the core movements of life. I have been doing CrossFit with a personal coach at the Perth Amboy YMCA for several years and that has been great. However, recently with the encouragement of my present and former coaches, I have transitioned to a CrossFit Box which is essentially a gym which focuses on CrossFit. Since I am middle aged and have a few injuries here and there, my biggest fear was that I would feel completely

inadequate compared to the super fit, super heroes in the class I was taking. That has not been the case.

The most amazing thing for me about being part of CrossFit classes is that they make a place for all. You can be 25 years old and do everything 1000%. Or you can be almost 50 years old with a bum knee and they will find a modification for the exercises of the day so you can participate. They will cheer for you even if you are the weakest - struggling through your push-ups with the help of a hundred bands to assist you. Your work counts even though it is different than what the others are doing. This to me captures the essential message of Paul's letter to the Romans.

He writes - Welcome those who are weak in faith. Don't worry about those who eat everything or whether they eat only vegetables. Don't judge those who abstain or those who don't abstain. Don't worry about those who think one day is better than another or those who think all days are alike. Paul asks, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?" Some may be stronger and some weaker in our practice of faith. Some may do things differently with how they follow Christ whether it is physical or spiritual.

In the end, it is about following Jesus Christ. It is about walking alongside with others and supporting them in their faith wherever they are and not focus on their weaknesses and leave them behind. Leave the complaining and judging behind. The first is not helpful and the second is not our job. Go forth. Stay focused on following Jesus Christ and watch out for those around you traveling the same road. Encourage them and cheer them on. In the end, we are all headed to the same place following Jesus Christ to wherever he may lead us.

Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? 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 give praise to God."*

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.