

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

9.13.26

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, writes Paul in his letter to the Romans. Paul is speaking to a diverse community of Jesus-followers. There are Gentiles who still observe some Roman holidays. And there are Jews, exiled to Rome by the emperor Claudius.

Some of them only eat vegetables, because they are afraid of eating meat that was sacrificed on an altar to a Roman god.

These are not small matters. They are serious issues of religious practice and theology. Paul does not give an opinion, but simply urges the community to have grace with each other, to not judge each other, to focus on the big picture, that is, Christ, to stay together through their differences.

Staying together through differences, for the bigger picture, was on display this past Friday. All of our living former presidents and their spouses stood together at the ceremony marking the 25th anniversary of that great tragedy, 9/11.

It was a reminder of the outpouring of sympathy and solidarity from the whole world in the immediate aftermath of that harrowing day. The French newspaper Le Monde proclaimed on September 12, We are all Americans.

We had our moment of sympathy, solidarity, and unity. We get glimpses of it each year at the anniversary. But sadly, when most of us think about the before and after of that day, it is not as a turning point where we all grew closer. It seems more like the point at which divisions increased, borders hardened, when air travel became an ordeal of scans, taking off shoes, and random searches. It feels like a line where we chose to hunker down rather than opening ourselves to something greater. Where the world became less safe, not only because of the terrorists' actions, but also because of our responses.

Paul is urging us to see a different way. He is urging the community in Rome to accept each others' differences and look to Christ.

In our Gospel, Jesus takes Paul's message of being together without judgement even further. Jesus is not subtle about the differences in the debts in his story -- we might think of the talents and denarii as ten million dollars versus twenty dollars. Jesus says, whether your sibling owes you ten million dollars or 20 bucks, you need to treat them with mercy. We are called to forgive each other, seventy-seven times over, whether the damage is minor or devastating.

Now we have real differences among us as a St Martin's community, about what signs should be in front of our church, about whether we are putting ourselves out there too much or not doing enough. And probably about many other things too.

And one of the strengths of this community is that these differences don't matter at all when it counts. When we need to come together, to grieve for a special person, to show up for a family, as we did yesterday at Nate Pierce's celebration of life, we are there.

There are big problems in our world. Racism. Anti-immigrant hate. The way we continue to destroy our planet. We are divided in how to address them. Sometimes we are divided on the basic facts. All of these collective sins were with us before 9/11. We all bear responsibility for them. Yet our divisions, that have only widened in recent years, make those problems overwhelming, too daunting to begin to address.

How can we as a community, as neighbors, come together in all our diversity to show up for these big problems? How can we try to turn back the clock to that September 12, when the whole world was standing with us?

Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything, the enslaved person says to the king. I don't think that Jesus is saying that our big debts do not have to be repaid. I don't think he's saying that we should not make reparations, that we should not pay restitution to each other and all of creation, that we should not work to heal the mess we have made.

Jesus is talking about forgiveness. Jesus is talking about having grace with each other for our smaller sins, for our smaller differences and debts.

If we cannot look past our twenty dollar differences with each other, how will we forgive ourselves for the ten million dollar sins? If we cannot work together across our differences, how can we hope to

make right what has gone wrong? If we cannot look beyond the vegetables and special celebrations, how will we see Christ?

St Martin's, 9/11 is a reminder of our many debts, a reminder of all the healing that has not yet happened. But it is not too late. We can take the practices of this St Martin's community out into our neighborhood and the world. We can learn to forgive each other, and forgive ourselves for our failings and differences, the minor and the catastrophic.

The only way to freedom, the only path through the Red Sea for us, is to go through it together. Let us look beyond what would divide us as we face the big problems of our world. Let us look to Christ, and get to work, paying our debts, and building the kingdom. Amen.