



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Life Before God and One Another

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

September 14, 2008

*Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*

Romans 14:1-12

A Rabbi and a Roman Catholic Priest were sitting next to each other at an Inter-faith event. When dinner was served someone thoughtlessly had placed a slab of ham in the Rabbi's plate. The Rabbi did not protest but simply proceeded to eat other things his faith and physician permitted. The Roman Catholic Father leaned over in the direction of the Rabbi and said, "Rabbi, you and I know that the dietary laws from the Old Testament were developed at a time when pork meat was indeed dangerous due to lack of refrigeration and low heat in cooking. Of course food-borne disease was rampant and your ancestors in the faith were right in prohibiting eating pork in order to save the lives of many Israelites. Those days are gone, pork is safe and there is no reason to cling to outmoded ancient practices. When will you eat your first mouthful of ham, Rabbi?" The Rabbi paused briefly and then responded, "At your wedding, Father, at your wedding."

In a silly way, that joke reminded me of some lines from a poem by Ann Weems, a Presbyterian writer. She writes

*Sometimes*

*in the stress of life  
we feel overwhelmed  
by the responsibility  
of faithfulness.*

*Sometimes*

*we feel  
that we are right  
and others,  
equally as faithful,  
feel that they are right.*

*O God, wouldn't it have been easier*

*on all of us  
if you had written down the rules?—  
if you had spelled it out?*

*NO DANCING*

*Or*

*DANCING OKAY.*

*This freedom thing*

*that you have handed us  
is not easy...not easy at all.*

*Perhaps the question is not about dancing*

*(or all the other choices we Christians argue about);  
Perhaps the question of faithfulness has to do with  
what is written on our hearts.*

Have you ever felt that way? We long for a clear, simplified statement of what God expects and what we ought to do. Many of us want a list of instructions that will help us to apply the brakes to an out-of-control culture that is careening down the tracks toward inevitable disaster.

What we are dealing with is what is often called the post-modern world. One young female theologian writing about the situation in today's world writes: (When I think of the world today, I think) "of things being dismantled. Of old things being taken apart. It's like I live in a world where all the things my parents took for granted as being 'true' are now lying around in fragments, and our generation is dancing around in the midst of these pieces....I feel like our generation is standing in the rubble of demolished houses, hoping someone shows up to help us figure out how to build something beautiful and safe.... We need someone to share with us the wisdom, the know-how, the basic rules of community, because we don't know those anymore."

As that opening joke reveals, one person's outmoded religious ritual, hopelessly connected to a long-gone past, is another's central defining tenet. There are many who would view our constant reciting of creeds and commandments in this congregation as a desperate clinging to an irrelevant past, and encourage us to dispense with such antiquated ways of worship and get modern, or postmodern as the case may be. And yet for us, these ancient ways connect us deeply to the God we love, and who loves us. The Confession of Sin, which many congregations have jettisoned because they judge it a downer, calls us back home when we've strayed, and the Lord's Prayer is the echo of our Savior, speaking to us now of God's desire that the kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. We cannot, most of us, imagine worship without these elements.

And yet there are others in our community who would not find a home in this place of worship at all. They would find us wooden, the frozen chosen, rote, and mired in old forms of worship that have long since lost meaning for the wider culture.

Precisely these sorts of issues are what drive Paul to speak of judging others in the church. This is not the only place in the New Testament where he speaks of these issues, but it is by far the most comprehensive treatment.

Two groups in the church are in conflict. One group, which Paul identifies as the "weak," feels the need to abstain from certain food and drink lest their faith be compromised. Paul has no trouble saying right where he stands in the matter. He thinks these Christians are weak. They have not yet felt the full freedom of life in Christ. He has long ago decided that it does not matter to God whether believers keep the dietary laws or eat meat offered to idols. Likewise, these weak Christians believe it still important to observe special days, while others in the community, and perhaps Paul himself, have decided that, again, freedom in Christ means the strict keeping of these days is no longer necessary.

One would imagine Paul might side with the strong over the weak, but what is

most fascinating about his response is that he does not choose sides at all. “He is intent rather on meeting the threat to Christian unity posed by the attempts of one of the groups to make its convictions about conduct the sole and exclusive measure of true and faithful response to God’s gift of God’s Son. He calls on both sides to respect the convictions of the other group.”

For Paul, in these instances, “The health of the believing community takes precedence over ‘right’ belief or ‘right’ observance.” And Paul grounds this conviction in the same place he grounds all others, baptism. By virtue of our baptism, we belong to Christ. We are members of the household of God. When we receive the mark of water, we are claimed by this God, and it is before this God that we stand or fall. This relationship is central, and defines all our other relationships. What then matters most is the “integrity of our relationship to God.”

Presbyterians have spoken of the integrity of our relationship to God, from the very beginning of Presbyterianism, with the phrase, “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” This is the first statement in our Book of Order under the Historic Principles of Church Order: “That God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable.”

And what that means for Presbyterians is that we believe God is the one who will judge us, which frees us from having to do it ourselves. And that doesn’t mean that we’re not going to hold one another accountable for sinful behavior; it just means that we are ultimately not the final judge. God is.

Henri Nouwen got at this when he wrote these words inviting us to “Imagine your having no need at all to judge anybody. Imagine your having no desire to decide whether someone is a good or a bad person. Imagine your being completely free from the feeling you have to make up your mind about the morality of someone’s behavior. Imagine that you could say: ‘I am judging no one!’

“Imagine – Wouldn’t that be true inner freedom?” Nouwen asks. He writes that he had a brief glimpse of that very freedom just after a seven-month retreat in a Trappist monastery. Returning to the world, he found himself filled with immense love for everyone. Wherever he went, he saw goodness, “even behind the facades of violence, destruction, and crime,” he writes. “I had to restrain myself from embracing the women and men who sold me groceries, flowers, and a new suit. They all seemed like saints to me!” Ultimately, Paul reminds us why we can see others in the church as saints, when he writes: “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.”