

## **It's not so much the food, it's the family that matters**

Romans 14: 1-12

Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church

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There is a story about a family where Grandma lives in the same house with her son and his spouse and several children of varying ages. Now in this home, one of the long standing family traditions is that at dinner time everyone is expected to be at the table. And when dinner is ready the call goes out, far and wide that the chow is on, and everyone is expected to come to the table.

On this particular evening, Grandma has arrived early to help feed the baby while the parents help set the table. The call goes out that dinner is ready and soon the twelve year old twins enter the room arguing over television rights; nevertheless, they are seated and it is time to pray. At that moment, however, everyone looks around the table and notices a place that is empty. Someone is missing from the table. It is the teenage son. He is not at the table. So the father heads upstairs to see what's the matter, and he finds his son in his room playing a video game. The son is wearing headphones and his dad has to touch his shoulder to get him to notice that he is in the room.

“Dinner is on and you are not at the table”, says the father to his son. “Didn’t you hear us call you?”

“Oh yeah”, says the son, “I heard you call for dinner, but I’m not coming tonight. It’s meatloaf and I don’t like it.”

***Now let me ask you a question: If you were the parent in this story, how would you respond? Take a moment to think about this. How would you respond? What would you say to the son?***

Most likely if you would say: “Get yourself to the table,” right?

And in doing so, of course, you would teach your son a profound lesson: ***It’s not about the food; it’s about the family!***

“Look son,” you might say, “I don’t care what we’re eating for dinner tonight you’re coming to dinner because you’re a part of this family. You see, it’s not so much the meal but the memories we make that’s important. And when you’re not there, we miss out on all you contribute, and you miss out, too. Sure it’s meatloaf tonight, but tomorrow we’re having pizza!”

Of course the next night you will not need to have the same talk with Grandma. You won’t have to talk to Grandma about being at the table, because long ago, she learned to appreciate the blessing of life and love. And while her stomach will not allow her to eat the pizza,

she will enjoy watching her grandchildren tear into it! Yes, in that moment she will be thankful just to have a seat at the table, and while everyone else is eating pizza and she is eating something else, Grandma will give thanks for life and for being a part of the family.<sup>1</sup>

Like the home in this story, the church too is a warm and wonderful place, filled with people of varying personalities, personal preferences and past experiences. And like the family in this illustration, we have been called to walk together as one. We are called to appreciate just what it is we have. A diverse family in Christ. And with us as well: **It is not about the food, but about the family.** It's about our being together at the fellowship table of Christ that matters the most. It's about our being together that matters most of all.

This important point is also what the apostle Paul was talking about in our scripture text today from Chapter 14 of the book of Romans. Like the teenage son in our story, some of the early Christians in Rome were saying that they wouldn't come to the table of fellowship because they were meat lovers and some in the community were vegetarians. And still others wouldn't come to the fellowship table because they were vegetarians and others were meat lovers. And while it may seem a bit silly to us today, that vegetarians and

meat lovers would have such issues with each other, it was very serious business to the people of Paul's day. In Paul's day and time the vegetarians and the meat lovers were pretty upset with one another. To the point of drawing lines in the sand saying things like, you couldn't really be a vegetarian and be Christian or you couldn't really be a meat lover and be Christian. And there were others in the same community who were arguing about which days and what times real Christians should fast—that is go without food for a time of prayer. And these arguments got pretty heated as well and pretty soon people were saying if you don't fast on the correct days, you can't come to the table of fellowship.

It reminds me of a Far Side cartoon I saw a while back. There are a bunch of people sitting around a table in a small room. And there are people in the room who are not at the table, but rather lying on the floor, looking exhausted and wounded. And the caption underneath reads "After much discussion, the church committee decided to paint the Sunday School Room Blue."

The truth is that from its beginnings the church has been made up of a rich diversity of people. People with varying personalities, personal preferences and past experiences. And the question has always been,

how do we deal with our differing perceptions on the correct way to live out the Christian faith? How do we deal with those who like meatloaf and those who like pizza? With those who are vegetarians and those who are meat lovers? Who is right and who is wrong? And most especially who is really the Christian in all of this?

Paul's answer helps us to find our way. Paul is not concerned with proving one group more right than another. The crux of his argument is that just as God has welcomed all kinds of believers into the household of faithfulness, all those who serve within that household must learn to accept each other.

And even more than that, Paul admonishes that not only is it alright for a variety of interpretations of Christian life to exist, but that in order to remain true to one's own faith convictions, these differences must continue to exist. That is, diversity is needed in the church and unity is also needed as well. And while we have differences, we are united by Christ's death and resurrection.

It's not the food, but the family that matters—that is the family of Christ and we are all expected and needed at Christ's table.

Honest, convicted differences are bound to exist within any body of Christ. But accepting them, not removing them, is the healthful attitude Paul encourages. The disagreements within the early church

were manifold. But worse than that, these disagreements became personal. And the church was becoming divided. So, Paul felt obligated to say something about it. He wanted them to "cool it." The church was big enough for all kinds of opinions. The important thing is that whatever their beliefs, their lives were to give glory to God. Out of this conflict within the church comes our lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans. It's not so much the food, but the family that matters. And we all need to come to the table because we are all part of this family.

Now I want to say a word here about our church family here at Ypsilanti First. I am so proud and honored to serve here as your pastor, most especially because I truly believe that we have the kind of diversity here that Paul says is so important for a true family of God. We are truly blessed in this church with such a rich diversity of people, not only different cultures and languages, but also age groups, experiences and personalities. As I travel around our conference, I don't see this kind of thing too often—and I want you to understand what a blessing it is to have this kind of family in our church. And we also have the kind of family where people understand that even when we are having something for dinner that might not be your favorite, you still come to the table because it is the family, not the food that matters most. It is being together at the table that matters most and I am proud and honored that we can do that here at Ypsilanti First. It

is one of the things that makes this church such a great and wonderful place. It's not about the food, it's about the family. And it's about being together—unity in diversity that matters most. Love, the love of Christ that matters most. Certainly much more than our distinctions and differences.

Each month, our District Superintendent, Tom Macaulay writes a column called Macaulay's Musings. In closing this sermon today, I would like to share with you a few of Tom's wise words from the September musings. Tom writes... "In this month's words, I invite you to help set a respectful tone in your churches as the election season 'heats up.' This election, like so many, tends to create and incite great passion and energy. People can allow differences to become divisions. Others will draw "lines in the sand" in all manner of settings and for all sorts of issues. It is crucial that we all honor each other and do what we can to encourage thoughtful, faithful debate. We can model for family and friends how to disagree without being disagreeable. People of faith often see the world in widely divergent ways... they often see 'the answer' in a prescriptive way. Matters about which we care deeply can sometimes lead us to say certain things that can divide, wound and damage the other... and the entire community of faith. Thus, as this 2008 Election draws closer, I encourage us, as leaders in our churches and in our communities, to model well a spirit of charity with

each other... and others. Let us speak with as much humility as clarity... with as much to learn from others as we have to share.”<sup>ii</sup>

Truly it is not about the food, but the family that matters. And we are all called to Christ’s table because supper is on. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> DeYmaz, Mark, Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation Jossey-Bass 2007 pp. 111-112

<sup>ii</sup> Macaulay, Tom. “Macaulay’s Musings” from *The Arbor Vine: The Newsletter of the Ann Arbor District of The United Methodist Church*, September 2008 Issue.

<http://www.gbgmumc.org/annarbordist/Newsletter/MacMusings/2008-Sept.html>