

Food fights. We don't see them too often, and perhaps we have never seen one before ever, but they do happen. Like when protesters lie down on city streets on Styrofoam trays covered with cellophane. The people participating in these types of demonstrations are usually either members of PETA -- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals or they support the cause that the organization stands for. By mimicking meat packages, they are trying to illustrate that all animals -- including humans -- are made of flesh, blood, and bone. Their message: Meat is murder.

On the other hand, we probably know people who put bumper stickers on their cars with the message: "I love animals. They're delicious." Or they say something like, "If God didn't want us to eat animals, why are they made out of meat?" Vegans versus carnivores. The battle can get pretty bloody. But food fights are nothing new. You might say that the Apostle Paul stepped into the middle of one as he was writing his letter to the Romans, our Second Lesson for today. In that case, the issue was not about the ethics of killing animals, nor did it focus on the health value of a low-fat vegan diet. Instead, the fight was about judging people.

The battle lines are drawn when Paul writes, "Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables." Those were fighting words in the first century, and they remain so today. Imagine an announcement being made in worship before the beginning of a potluck dinner: "When you enter the fellowship hall, those who are strong in faith will put their meat and potato dishes to the left, while those who are weak in faith will put their vegetarian dishes to the right."

Food would fly, no doubt about it. But here's the deal with Paul: He's not really taking a stand on whether a person should eat meat or not. Sure, he would no doubt consider himself to be strong in faith and able to eat anything -- his personal conviction is that there are no food restrictions in the kingdom of God. But his

point to the Romans is that meat-eaters should withhold judgment toward those who are vegetarians, and vegans should welcome carnivores. "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain," says Paul, "and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat."

"Don't vex the vegans!" insists Paul to the meat-eaters. "And don't criticize the carnivores!" he says to the vegetable-eaters. But why not? Well, we live in a world in which people vex each other all the time. Red state, blue state. Pro-guns, no guns. Liberals, conservatives. Tea Party, coffee party. Democrats, Republicans. Fox News, CNN. Seahawks, 49ers. Our polarized nation is full of groups constantly criticizing each other.

Into a similarly divided Roman church, Paul writes, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." In other words, we are called to focus on welcoming others instead of judging them. We are to put our energy into connecting instead of quarreling. And why should we do this? Because God has done it, that's why. "For God has welcomed them." End of story.

So how, exactly, do we live in a community of faith with those who are different from ourselves, even those we consider to be "weak in faith"? For starters, we make a conscious decision to let Jesus be the judge. "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" asks Paul. In the first century, servants were judged by their own lords and masters, not by other servants. In the same way, a vegan Christian is judged by his Lord Jesus, just as a carnivorous Christian is going to be assessed by Jesus. It is not up to meat-eaters to judge vegetable-eaters, or vice versa.

"Don't judge," insists Paul. "Just don't do it. Let Jesus take care of passing judgment." And if we are honest with ourselves, sometimes this is tough for us to do, because we love to push back when someone hits us with an opinion that we

find objectionable. We have a hard time holding our tongue when a fellow Christian makes a claim that seems so wrong to us ... theologically, biblically, ethically and/or spiritually. But remember: "It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall," says Paul. "And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand."

Paul's not saying that every servant of Christ is going to be perfect in word and deed, but he is predicting that they will be upheld in the resurrection by the power of their relationship with Jesus their Lord. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves," Paul writes. "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Vegan. Carnivore. Red State. Blue State. Pro-gun. Anti-gun. Whether we vote Democratic or Republican, we are not our own, we are the Lord's. So don't judge. Just. Don't.

(Please NOTE): This is NOT to say that Christians should not have opinions, and it is certainly not to say that Christians should be reluctant to express those opinions. It is to say that when we Christians encounter those in the faith, of a divergent point of view, we must be very careful before we characterize them as immature in their faith, or in our belief that perhaps they belong outside the family of God. We CAN have the opinion that they are wrong; we should *not* however hold the opinion that they are, *ipso facto*, faithless, godless, backsliding, spineless, or insidious followers of Jesus!

Instead, we are to accept that God wants there to be a certain amount of diversity within the community of faith. The overarching narrative of the Bible is a story of ever-increasing inclusiveness, beginning in the Old Testament in the book of Ruth with the marriage of Boaz of Bethlehem to a Moabite woman named Ruth -- a foreigner who ends up being the great-grandmother of King David. It continues with God's call for cultural barriers to fall and for people of all nations to be part of "a house of prayer for all peoples as mentioned by the prophet Isaiah."

This movement only accelerates in the New Testament when Jesus begins his loving and gracious ministry to tax collectors and sinners, and when Paul takes the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul encourages this diversity when he writes that some people judge one day to be better than another, while others do not, and the important thing is that each be at peace with his or her understanding. Neither eating nor abstaining is a superior practice for Christians, because both can be done, he says, "in honor of the Lord." A diversity of perspectives and practices can be embraced by the Christian faith as long as everything brings honor to Jesus Christ.

At Calvary Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, the pastor there struggled with a number of older Caucasian members in his congregation after he expressed excitement about the growth of the church through the incorporation of African immigrants. The pastor was feeling very positive about the congregation's growing racial-ethnic diversity, while his members were experiencing a sense of loss -- the church that had been comfortable for them and their families was rapidly changing into something that felt radically different.

The pastor held on to hope, believing that developing personal relationships would be the secret to navigating this difficult passage, and he had faith that over time some friendships would develop as people of different ages and cultures rubbed elbows during worship, potluck dinners, committee meetings, and workdays. There remained tension in the church, for sure, but many important bonds did develop, especially as multicultural teams worked together to host weekly coffee hours after worship.

One day, the pastor was deeply moved as he saw one of his elders, a white retiree, walk forward at a regional church meeting and publicly embrace an African immigrant parishioner who had become a candidate for ordained ministry. Their

connection, across the boundaries of race and culture, brought honor to Jesus Christ. In place of vexing, there was thanksgiving.

Finally, says Paul, think about how your own acts of judgment will look on the Day of Judgment. "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?" he asks. "Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." In other words, we should reflect on how our own acts of judging and despising will look when we receive our own final judgment.

"Do not judge," says Jesus according to the gospel of Luke, "and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Jesus is telling us that we will receive exactly what we offer others in terms of judgment and condemnation. In fact, you might say that the best way to prepare for the Day of Judgment is to treat others exactly as we would like to be treated, replacing condemnation with forgiveness. We observe this in our Gospel this morning when Jesus tells us the parable of a slave who is forgiven of a great debt by his master, but who fails to forgive a smaller debt that was owed to him by another.

Instead of vexing vegans, we should focus on welcoming them. Rather than criticizing carnivores, we should show them Christian hospitality. All of our words and actions should be done "in honor of the Lord," and should strengthen our relationship with Christ. In the end, our goal is to build a community that fits the vision of the book of Revelation, in which there is "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

All tribes. All people. All languages. When we stand before that Lamb, we won't be thinking about whether or not we eat lamb chops. We'll simply be thankful that we belong to Jesus, the Lamb of God. There will be no food fights

there, but only worship of the one who is the Lord of the dead and the living, Lord of the liberals and the conservatives, the Tea party and the coffee party, the strong and the weak. Our vexations will have vanished, our protests replaced by praise. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.