

**19A 2023**

Since its founding, the church has been the place where people of all types worked together to build community based on an awareness that we are all *equally* loved children of God.

Since its founding, the church has *also* been the place where those who fail to grasp this central message have tried to find ways to divide people based even on such things as who baptized them.

In today's reading, Paul remonstrates with the Romans, who are fighting over the eating of meat and the elevation of one day of the week above others.

He tells them to let those who eat meat do so and to let those who do not eat meat abstain.

They are not to despise one another.

They must learn, in other words, that meat is not the issue.

Similarly, those who honor one day as more special than another should not quarrel with those who see all days as the same.

Let them do whatever they do in order to honor God—eating meat, not eating meat, honoring, not honoring—but they are to continue working together.

Though they should welcome those who are still weak in faith, those who do not fully grasp the central message, that they might grow, they are not to permit quarreling over opinions so that trusting relationships can be maintained.

The point is building community, or, as Paul explains it, “we do not live to ourselves.”

He is telling the Romans that their *opinions* simply are not that important.

It is their relationships that matter.

Outside the church, community was mostly a matter of creating a sense of belonging through negative identity by emphasizing what one is not.

As Dr. Seuss describes the star-bellied Sneetches, “With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they’d snort. They’d have nothing to do with the plain-bellied sort.”<sup>1</sup>

As one star-bellied mother admonishes her son,

“Ronald, remember. When you are out walking, you walk past a Sneetch of that type without talking. Keep your snoot in the air and remember to snort. We have no truck whatever with the plain-bellied sort.”<sup>2</sup>

In the world, groups vie to be the ones on top by making others scapegoats.

This negative way of creating community appeals because focusing on what we are not allows us to remain unaware of who we are.

We can answer the question, “Who are you?” by saying “Not one of those hated whatevers” rather than with the answer advised by Christianity: “A beloved child of God and a person with certain gifts and certain weaknesses who seeks to serve the whole.”

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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdLPe7XjdKc>

2 Ibid.

Christian society was to be scapegoat-less, that is, Jesus was supposed to be the last scapegoat, and yet there are many branches of Christianity that define themselves, if one listens carefully, in terms of what they are not.

They may justify it with a long list of beliefs that they claim are positive definitions, but many of those beliefs are akin to Romans not eating meat.

It is a distinction without significance.

I read a recent Pew Research study about the Episcopal Church.

They found that 31% of Episcopalians identify as conservative, 37% as centrists, and 29% as liberal.<sup>3</sup>

I thought, “Given the current cultural/political climate, we must be doing something right to be including everyone.”

There are churches who preach politics, who even tell their parishioners how to vote.

For them, disagreement with the church authorities means disagreement with God, but this is not what Paul tells us.

We may disagree about things, but we let the Lord sort it out while we continue to work together.

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3 <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/episcopal-church/political-ideology/>

The church is the place where, even in our divided society, everyone who even thinks he wants to share the goal of a positive, scapegoat-less community is welcome.

I hope that, when you walk in the church doors, you sense that you are at home in a special way.

It is important from the perspective of theology, and it is important to me personally.

In truth, the Episcopal Church was the first place I ever felt at home, and I want everyone to have that experience.

We are the place dedicated to learning to love our brothers and sisters.

For Christians, community is not a nice addition to life, but is absolutely essential to everyone's well being, essential to our fulfilling our purpose here on earth, fundamental to having a meaningful existence.

Coming together in this manner has transformative effects.

We start to let go of the things that hinder us from being fully who we are and to become that person God created us to be.

Such transformation necessarily happens not in isolation, but in community.

Real community requires forgiveness.

By forgiveness, we do not merely mean "I forgive you for criticizing my raspberry tart," though that can be part of it.

We mean forgiving others for not being all we think we need them to be for us.

It has been said that the measure of a Christian is not how much she loves Jesus, but how much she loves Judas.

In response to Peter's question about how many times he should forgive a member of the church who sins against him, Christ relates the parable of the king who forgave the slave's debt.

In other words, the king let go of the fact that the slave could not provide what the king wanted.

Later, that same slave refused to do the same for a fellow slave.

As a result of the first slave's failure to forgive, he essentially excluded himself from the kingdom of heaven.

This parable teaches that we are to embrace *all* our brothers and sisters who sincerely wish to embrace us, even though they may not fulfill our needs and expectations as we do not fulfill their needs and expectations.

Other people were not placed here to serve us, but to serve the whole, which is God.

We are placed here to gain wisdom along our particular path.

We are to respect one another's paths.

If we do not, we will find ourselves isolated from everything that matters, excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

If *others* insist that we be who they want us to be or be rejected, then we are to walk  
away.

Not dwelling in community is taking the easy way out, where “out” means out of the  
kingdom.

The church exists for all who want to learn to embrace their brothers and sisters.

The more we succeed, the closer we are to the kingdom of heaven.

The more we fail, the farther we are from it, and one can feel it.

I believe in the mission of the church.

It is central to our purpose as creatures of God.

The church community is how we fulfill that purpose.

[This is why I support it with my time, talent, and treasure.

Each year, I give ten percent of my income, before taxes, to the church because, despite  
what our culture leads people to believe, community is essential to our goals on  
earth.

\_\_\_\_\_ would now like to talk with you about our stewardship campaign and  
how you can help to preserve this sacred community.]

Amen.