

“Almost Surely”

Matthew 7:15-20; Romans 14:1-12 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 26, 2023

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that your Spirit of Wisdom might fill our minds and add confidence to our conviction. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

When “Almost” became our theme for Lent, I have to be honest: I wasn’t really sure why. It was one word, given to me on a walk, without any additional explanation. But Tesa and I sat with it and thought of the many ways the word “almost” is used idiomatically in English, and it seemed like there might be something here. Today, as we look at the idiom “Almost Surely,” it suddenly makes sense to me. “Almost” is a Lenten theme because it is about humility. Thus far, it’s been about the sort of humility that invites us to consider our dependence on God and God’s all-sufficient grace. But today, it points toward a humility that is central to Disciples – capital D Disciples – character.

You have heard me express my hopes that this anniversary year will draw us into conversation that help us clarify our guiding values and convictions. I believe such a process is essential, both for our own spiritual growth and for the flourishing of our congregation in ministry and membership. Most of us figure out what we believe by talking it through it with others. And if we want to welcome people into our community, we need to be able to explain what we’re doing here. Who would invite someone to an event without knowing what the event was?

This sort of clarity has always been a challenge for Disciples though, precisely because of our non-creedal nature. Love Jesus, we say, and the particulars will sort themselves out. And while we love that freedom, the vagueness there often doesn't serve us well. You heard me explaining our "WE BELIEVE" series a few weeks ago. Slides on our electronic sign on Massachusetts Avenue that are also now on our social media pages, say "WE BELIEVE" followed by a rotation of changing statements that aim to express what kind of church we are. But because we're Disciples, there is a caveat in the caption on Instagram that says, "As part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we cherish each person's right to discern the particulars of their faith within the community. But there are some basics we share!"

In other words, "Almost Surely" this is what we believe! So let's talk about that today, the difficulty of finding the balance between holding strong faith convictions and leaving room for the diversity of perspective present in humanity and the humility of knowing that no one person will ever have it all figured out. This dilemma Paul is addressing in Romans 14 is one of my favorite ways to get at such questions.

First of all, in case the context isn't clear, let's remind ourselves of some background. Paul is not addressing a matter of personal taste here. When he says some "eat only vegetables," he is addressing the reality in the Romans' context that if there was meat to be eaten, it was most likely meat that had been previously used as sacrifice in a pagan temple. For many Christians in Rome, pagan sacrifice was something they didn't want to endorse, so they abstained from eating it, which meant

vegetables were what was available. Now, Paul clearly had an opinion about this question, as evidenced by his calling these religious vegetarians “weak,” which he made sense of by insisting that the pagan gods weren’t real, so the meat wasn’t actually tainted because there was nothing there to corrupt it. If you believed strongly enough in the falseness of those gods, he seems to imply, eating this meat wouldn’t bother you. But in this instance, Paul is trying his best to lay his personal perspective on the question aside, because he’s trying to make a bigger point. The issue is not the specific practice, but the faith that underlies it. If you eat the meat and give thanks to God for it, great. If you don’t eat the meat and give thanks to God for your vegetables, great. Don’t let this difference be a barrier that keeps you from eating together!

In many ways, Paul is applying the teaching of Jesus from Matthew 7 to the Romans’ dietary dilemma. To mix our food metaphors, he’s sussing out the fruits of the meat or vegetables question. And this is the practice that we are called to, in order to grow in faith and faithfulness. We aren’t aiming for certainty, which implies a sort of ideological arrogance that is counter to the way of Jesus. We’re trying to be Almost Sure, clear enough in our discernment that we’re willing to shape our lives around the convictions we’ve developed.

Let’s talk about that word for a moment, “conviction.” How does that land with you? Is it a strong word? An intimidating word? A word you use or don’t use to describe your beliefs? I think it’s a strong word, and I think that strength makes it

useful and powerful. To be clear, the word “conviction” has two different contexts, doesn’t it? We’re not really talking about the criminal justice context here. On the other hand, I think there is a connection there that we do well to recognize. To use the word “conviction” to talk about your beliefs, implies that your life would show evidence of those beliefs. Conviction is a belief that you act on. If there is no evidence from your behavior that you follow Jesus, can you really be said to follow Jesus? That’s the level of commitment the word “conviction” implies.

The other phrase I’ve been using “guiding values” is a softer approach to the same thing. A “value” is one thing. You may call a certain belief a “value” that you hold, but if it doesn’t guide your life – that is, influence your behavior – it may not be as important to you as you claim. Show me your calendar and your bank register, and I’ll tell you what you believe, the saying goes. Or as Jesus puts it, “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

This is such an important realization for us, as we collect ourselves and work toward introducing ourselves more intentionally to our community. They are going to hear what we say by our actions just as loudly as they hear what we say with our words. A church like the one in Rome, where people were internally divided over what to eat and whether or not to observe certain holidays, could become a mess of acrimony such that no one would want any part of it. OR, as Paul was pleading with them to do, they could welcome one another without passing judgment on the particularities of each one’s practices and be a witness for the love that engenders

unity in the midst of diversity. That is a tree whose fruit would appeal to multitudes. That is a tree whose fruit tastes like love and respect and liberty and humility.

So how do we cultivate such a tree? Part of the process is thinking deeply and prayerfully about what our convictions are. What are the beliefs that shape what we do? What are the values that guide our lives and our shared ministries? Who is the Jesus that we are proclaiming here and how can we act in such a way that people will see him clearly?

I want to invite you into a conversation we began at the Elders meeting last weekend. If you haven't already lost it, there should be a little card in your bulletin. I'd love to learn your answer to the question written there. What is the most important thing we say about God and/or Jesus here at VLM? Now, I know "most important" can trip some of us up. Don't get caught there. You can write more than one. It can be one important thing, instead of "the most" important thing. But give me something. Find a pen or a pencil and jot down your thoughts. Zoomers, I'd love to have you put your responses in the chat box. What is the most important thing we say about God and/or Jesus here at VLM? It might be something we say in words. Or it might be something we say through action. I would pray that there isn't that large a gap between those two categories. I would love to have you drop that card in the offering plate when it comes around later. Or if you need to think a little longer, you can give it to me after worship, or later this week. I am excited to see your thoughts, as we begin this process of becoming Almost Sure, sure enough to share

our fruits with our neighbors. Sure enough to welcome all and not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Who knows? Your answer might even end up on our sign! One of the things that came up at our Elders meeting last week is now on the list.

It is true that Jesus has counseled us in the ways of humility, especially those of us living out our faith in the Disciples tradition. But he also told us not to hide our lights under bushel baskets. So let's figure out how to make those lights shine. Let's work to figure out our words and ensure that they are backed up by our actions. We're aiming for Almost Sure, not certainty. The world doesn't need our arrogant answers; the world needs our humble willingness to ask questions with grace and compassion and live out our convictions as best we can. May the Spirit bless our discernment with fruitfulness and light!