

“Whom Shall I Fear?”

Romans 8:12-16; Romans 14:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might find peace
knowing that we are yours. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

You probably already know this, but in case you don't, let me confess that Deborah plans our anthems far in advance of when I figure out what I will be preaching on on any given Sunday. Usually it works out fine. Sometimes it works out better than fine. And sometimes, like today, I just take the hint. With all that is going on at the moment, leaning into Halloween by taking some time to explore fear seemed like a good idea.

But before we get to the main points here, we need to do a little contextualization of these passages we just read from Romans, so that we can then properly apply them to our topic. First of all, Paul is kind of famous for making these rigid positive-negative comparisons between body and spirit, binaries that have come to seem less than helpful and even counter to a solid theology of the Incarnation. So I want to share with you something one of my seminary professors told our class one day. It's important to remember that everyone who wrote the Bible was living before pain killers. And before toothpaste. So even if you hadn't gotten beaten up hiking to Jericho, chances were high that you lived half your life with a bad

toothache. Once you think about all the modern inventions we take for granted that make our physical lives more comfortable, benefits biblical writers did not have, it's easier to understand why they might not have particularly positive feelings about their bodies. That's not even the part of the reading from Romans 8 that I want to focus on today, but I didn't want to leave it hanging unaddressed, because that overblown spirit/body dichotomy has done a lot of damage over the years.

So let's turn to Romans 14 now, which gets even more interesting. Some of you might have gotten excited for a second, thinking you now had biblical justification to be snide about vegetarians. But that's not really what Paul is on about here. What we need to be aware of is that in Rome at the time Paul was writing, most of the meat available for sale was coming from the gift shops – well, butcher shops – of pagan temples. It was meat that had been ritually sacrificed to pagan gods. One telling factor here is that the pagan gods did not manage to consume the meat. So instead, it was sold, presumably providing revenue for the temple.

This meat, as you might imagine, caused some controversy among the young Christian community in Rome. Some people thought that buying and eating such meat would be collaborating with the pagan temple in a way that was unfaithful to Christ. But others, including Paul, insisted that the pagan gods were imaginary in the first place, so the meat couldn't be tainted by them because they weren't real. Paul saying that “the weak eat only vegetables” was a not particularly tactful way of saying

that acting like there was something sinful about the meat indicated a subtle if unconscious concern that maybe those pagan gods were real.

Given the way he put it, Paul clearly had a strong opinion about this question. But did you hear how he insisted it be handled? Even though he was convicted that one position was correct and the other was not, he told the Roman Christians that they should tolerate one another's positions on the issue. He even goes so far, later in the chapter, to suggest that those who did eat the meat should consider abstaining while in the presence of their vegetable-eating friends if it would cause them unease.

There was similar dissension about holidays. Paul doesn't specify which holidays he's talking about, but most likely this is about Jewish festivals that Jewish Christians would celebrate and Gentile Christians would not. Paul presumably grew up celebrating those same Jewish festivals, yet here is he arguing that the important thing is to "let all be fully convinced in their own minds." It's a very Disciple argument, honestly! Some of us will do it this way, and some will do it that way, and that's okay.

Which brings me to Halloween. No, Paul was not writing about Halloween, but his counsel here about festivals and eating practices offer us some good insight on the way different Christian communities relate to Halloween. I don't know if you looked at it, but the second line on our Trunk-or-Treat sign very clearly says "Neighborhood Halloween Party." Why is that notable? Because there are churches

who would never put the word “Halloween” on their sign. They would hold an event and call it a “Fall Festival,” even though there was going to be candy and children would be encouraged to wear costumes. The disguises some of these events try to wear are never very good, because they’re not trying to convince anyone that they’re not a direct alternative to Halloween; trying to be a direct alternative to Halloween is exactly what they’re doing, pulling out all the “fun” without the doctrinal risk of seeming to promote a festival that revels in skeletons and spooky spirits. It’s what Paul might call vegetarian Halloween.

I grew up in the era when Halloween was haunted by overhyped “stranger danger,” which I believe was when many of these church events were originated. There was cultural pressure for good parents to take their little ones to “safe” events in church parking lots, instead of knocking on the doors of their neighbors, who were possibly strangers and therefore risky. By the time I began my ministry in Alabama, this alienation from our neighbors had grown rather pronounced. So instead of launching a Trunk-or-Treat, like the glorious and unapologetic Neighborhood Halloween Party we held here yesterday, we invented the “Neighborhood Halloween Project.” The goal was to bring the neighborhood together, encouraging people to get to know one another by celebrating the holiday. A week or two beforehand, we went door-to-door, offering people jack-o-lantern signs they could put up on their door if they were going to be passing out candy, so families would know which doors

to knock on. Then, on the night of Halloween, we had people on corners with flashlights and cell phones, ready to assist and guide trick-or-treaters. We let people park in our lot while they traipsed around the neighborhood and offered hot apple cider and eventually even marshmallow roasting. Rather than introducing our church as an “oasis of safety” in a “dangerous world,” we were trying to communicate that our congregation was part of the neighborhood, that we loved our neighbors, and that the gift of hospitality is one we can offer to one another.

Since this was happening in Alabama, you might not be surprised to hear that we got some pushback. Really just a few grouchy phone messages, if I recall correctly. But friends, it’s not just Alabama. Some of you will remember back a few years ago when we held Trunk-or-Treat on Sunday afternoon, and the “upstairs church” was still worshipping in the afternoon. There were some cold looks cast, and I never thought that was just about the lack of parking. At one point, I made an effort to include this other congregation and it was made clear that they had no interest in that sort of thing. And it’s not just the church upstairs; we got a really nasty phone call one year when we added a haunted house to Trunk-or-Treat. Some followers of Christ do not celebrate the festivals other followers of Christ do. Some are more bothered by the proximity to things that look like they might be promoting paganism than others are. Paul counsels tolerance in all directions. And so we coexist.

Except we're not as good at that as we'd like to be, are we? There are other things focusing on Halloween invites us to contemplate. The biggest one is fear. And I would argue that one of our most common, if more trivial fears is the one at the center of these controversies Paul is discussing that have morphed into modern-day debates. We're simply not that comfortable knowing that other people intentionally choose to live their lives in ways that directly contradict the way we live our lives. If we celebrate Halloween, we look down on the people who don't, thinking something along the lines of "the weak eat only vegetables." Those who drink alcohol are often offended by the presence of someone who doesn't, because they assume that person's choice is a judgment on their choices. New mothers know this pressure, when everyone and their favorite mommy-blogger are trying to tell them the "best" way to raise their child. This is how trends happen; this is why online influencer has become a career. Human beings are immensely susceptible to peer pressure, not just in our teens, but our whole lives long. We are not good at not judging people who live differently than we do, nor are we good at feeling secure and confident about ourselves when we see people doing things differently than we do.

And this is why I wanted us to hear those verses from Romans 8; not because of the verses about the Spirit versus the body, but because I wanted you to hear that you are beloved child of God; you have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption, which means you belong to the

Most High God. The Lord is our light and our salvation; whom shall we fear? The question is rhetorical. We belong to God; we need fear no one.

And yet, here we are at the end of October 2025, and fears of many varieties are floating all around us. Halloween raises a question I've always found interesting, partially because other people seem to relate to it so differently than I do. Why is it that so many people enjoy scary things? You know what I mean – haunted houses, horror movies, creepy costumes, and the like. I've never really understood the attraction, but I'm trying not to judge. You freaky people know who you are! In terms of childhood development, I can see the utility of having children be in a safe and contained environment with marginally “scary” things, because it helps them learn that they can do scary things and come out on the other side okay. But I am the jumpiest of the jump-scared, and I'm not quiet about it. 0 out of 10, do not recommend; yet I know that so many other people like all that.

What's ironic about that is that the primal fear at the root of Halloween is death, of course, and I'm not particularly freaked out by death. Serving as a pastor since I was 26 probably has something to do with that, but I would also give credit to my grandma, who took me to 2 funerals and a visitation in one day when I was eight or so. I think it's really important for us to talk about death. We will get into that more next week when we observe All Saints. What I love about these verses from Romans 14 is that, like Halloween, they touch on the whole gamut of fears, from peer

pressure all the way to death. Because knowing that we are children of God, given a spirit of adoption rather than fear, doesn't mean that we've been given a "get out of death free" card, does it? Rather it means what Paul wrote, "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."

And that's why the fear enters in, isn't it? Because even though we know that our lives are in God's trustworthy and faithful hands, we also know that God's understanding of "turning out okay" is not necessarily the same as ours. It would be Christian malpractice for us to tell the parents who lost their children in these tragic accidents this week that it's fine because now they're with God. That's not what loving our neighbors looks like. The death of a child is a desperate, breath-stealing fear. While we pray for those families, we must also lift prayers for all the parents who are faced with whether to continue allowing their kids to walk to school each morning, with this visceral reminder of the risk involved, no matter how unlikely. It's important to remember, as Episcopalian writer Kelly Ryan of North Carolina tells us, that the Bible doesn't tell us not to *feel* afraid, it tells us not to *be* afraid. There is an important difference between our feelings and our identity. Sometimes a crisis or trauma overtakes someone and becomes their identity, keeping them from living freely and flourishing. We know that that is not how God wants us to live.

So how do we balance these things – the legitimate use of fear to alert us to danger, an honoring of the fact that we were designed for life, with a faith that helps us hold ourselves lightly, our feelings, our egos, and indeed, even our lives, because we know that in the end, God holds it all? How do we respond, as people of faith, to a world that is filled with dangers, but also has fear mongers running rampant, ginning up false threats to keep people scared and compliant?

Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton offers a strategy with an acronym that ironically spells out FEAR. F – Face your fears; practice doing the thing that scares you, even if it means coming to the 7:20 AM Toastmasters meeting in Bailey Hall to learn more about public speaking. E – Examine your assumptions in light of the facts; so often our fears are based in made-up exaggerations of what’s really happening. A – Attack your anxiety with Action; when we let fear paralyze us, it’s hard to get out from under it, but if we do something – sometimes even just anything we can manage to do – we can shift ourselves into a better place. And finally R – Release your cares to God; and here is where we come back to that spirit of adoption, that trust that God is our light and salvation.

Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. The ends are not ours to control; all we can do is live faithfully in the meantime, pursuing the flourishing of creation as best we can in the face of whatever comes. We can live our lives with intentionality and thoughtfulness, so that we are confident in ourselves and our

choices, rather than constantly feeling judged and judgmental. We can offer tolerance – and better than tolerance: understanding, compassion, and community – to our neighbors who live differently than we do. We can accept the inevitability of death, so that in our efforts to avoid it, we don't overdo it and let fear become our identity and miss out on living. We can speak up, with words of truth and faith, when others are sowing fear in attempts to control and manipulate our communities. And if we want, we can celebrate Halloween, practicing being scared in order to remind ourselves that we've been scared before and we've gotten through it every time. Just keep the jump scares for yourselves, okay? Hallelujah and Amen!