"That Disciple Life"

Matthew 16:24-26; Romans 14:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be humbled, our faith revived, our fellowship deepened and our joy and hope increased. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

As you likely remember, three weeks ago you had a guest preacher because I was across town sharing a word with our friends at Missiongathering, helping to give them a clearer picture of what it means to be part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States & Canada. One of the sources that I used for that sermon is this little book that came out from Chalice Press this summer called "We Call Ourselves Disciples," which is a series of 12 essays, edited by Kamilah Hall Sharp and Joel Brown. It's a really great resource and I would love for us to find a way to study it together and dig into the curriculum that's been prepared to go along with it. I promise this isn't the same sermon that I gave over there, although maybe it should be, as we can all use some refreshers from time to time about the core values of our tradition, right?

We did, however, read most of this same passage from Romans 14, which for me, is a great way of showing how Disciples try to be in community with one another, within our tradition and with ecumenical partners. We don't all have to worship God

the same way. We can have deep practical differences in how we follow Jesus, and yet be one at the table of Christ because it's Christ who makes us one, not our practices or the finer points of our theologies. That is, we can believe in and proclaim this unity, but that doesn't always mean we do a great job of it! One of the things I noted at Missiongathering is that I also appreciate this passage because despite Paul's obvious and deep commitment to unity, he also, hilariously, can't keep himself from self-righteously revealing which side of that meat-versus-vegetables debate he's on. Our faith is a constant cycle of declaring our principles and then seeking the grace we need when we fail to live up to them.

But whether the question is about eating habits or holiday celebrations, the over all point is a very big-D Disciples one: we each have the liberty to interpret our faith according to our own consciences. "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds," as Paul writes. Or as a good Sunday school teacher might amend it, "or at least in the process of becoming fully convinced in your own mind." But don't let someone else just hand you answers.

This liberty is one of our most cherished principles as Disciples. And yet, it may also be our most abused principle. I have a very vivid memory of being in the Exhibit Hall at a General Assembly, not all that long ago, and making some off-hand remark to our former Chief Ecumenical Officer Robert Welsh about how proud we Disciples are that, as we often try to shorthand it, "we can believe whatever we want."

Robert grew immediately serious and said to me very clearly something along the lines of, "That's not true. The saying isn't 'no creed." It's 'no creed but Christ.' And that second part is the most important." We do have a shared belief; it's what we sometimes call that "first good confession," in which we declare, as you'll find at #355 in your Chalice Hymnal, that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world."

Disciples like to give thanks that our faith tradition is so well aligned with the principles of democracy. We believe everyone should have a voice and that the diversity of voices and perspectives within our church gives us a richer portrait of God and God's work in the world. But sometimes, we are so enamored of our own gracious tolerance that we skip right over the first part of our confession of faith, which fundamentally contradicts our attachment to self-determination. What does it mean for someone in the 21st century to declare Jesus as Lord? We are fiercely independent people, but this profession of faith seems to indicate that we are admitting there is an authority higher than our own conscience. Do we really mean it? Do we really live it?

I would argue that this is the basic tension that Paul is exhibiting in Romans 14. He is certain in his own mind that it is totally fine to eat that meat that's been sacrificed to idols in pagan temples, because none of that is real. But he also recognizes a higher law than his own theological logic, one that compels him to

respect something beyond himself. Because his fellow Christians worship his same Lord, he has to acknowledge that his conviction is not the last word. I would say it is precisely because we declare Jesus is Lord (rather than our own minds) that we are bound to make space for the ways that other people live out that conviction differently than we do.

Those 12 verses from Romans 14 say a lot about the various approaches to faith and how they're all to be respected. But the word "Lord" appears in there 10 times, and the word "God" six times. We disciples of Christ are not actually the main point here; God is. Even our own name ought to remind us of that. We are the Christian Church – an institution that aims to live in Christ-like ways – Disciples of Christ – made up of individuals who have declared that they are followers of Christ. We cannot be big-D Disciples without being small-d disciples, that is, followers of Christ, students of Christ, those who find ultimate authority for our lives not merely in our own consciences but in the living presence and witness of Christ Jesus.

It is because we have yielded our hearts in that way that we strive to live with the humility that makes room for the way other people worship our one God. It is precisely because we have confessed Jesus as Lord that we discover our need for church. As Disciples pastor Nathan Russell writes in his essay on Liturgy and Worship in this book, "Worship is a countercultural act in a world governed by autonomy, capitalism, sin, and death. The cost of dedicating sixty to ninety minutes

on a Sunday morning to communal worship is significant, especially in an era in which the individualistic mindset of being 'spiritual but nor religious' continues to rise." This is as true for our ministry in the community and the way we carry ourselves in the rest of our lives as it is for our shared worship life. To proclaim Jesus as Lord is to confess our individual interdependence. It asks us to take up our cross and sit down to eat or work alongside that person who "eats only vegetables" with as little self-righteousness as we can manage.

While we may chafe at the apparent limits to our own autonomy that declaring Jesus as Lord imposes, it's important to recognize there can be great relief there as well. To proclaim Jesus as Lord is a way of acknowledging that we have made mistakes and we will continue to make mistakes. To proclaim Jesus as Lord relieves us of the burden of having to be perfect. To proclaim Jesus as Lord can be our first step to admitting we need grace, for whatever mis-steps we have or will make. Conversely, when we have truly done the work of becoming "fully convinced in our own minds" about the vital questions of faith, we can honestly stand on our own convictions in the face of those who would condemn with proof-texting or "literalism," knowing that we have sincerely sought the counsel of Christ and been received the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Do you need to have a fully-formed treatise explaining what it means when you say "Jesus is Lord"? Not necessarily, although those are also allowed. But you do

need to be able to lean on that truth to help you live your life; you need to have some sense of where the lines are, what your standards for faithfulness are and what happens when you fail to live them out. Do you have to figure that out all on your own? Absolutely not! That's why we're not just Disciples of Christ, we're also the Christian Church. Because we do it together, even if we don't all end up in the same place after each discussion. Can you believe "whatever you want"? Sort of. If you have declared Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaimed him as Lord and Savior of the world, you need to figure out what that means for you. It can be highly traditional or wide and loose. Jesus is what holds us together here, even when everything else may send us flying in separate directions. However you make sense of that in your own heart and head, the invitation remains. You are welcome here. You are invited to this Table of Grace. You are beloved, by God and all of us. Together, we are the Christian Church, disciples of Christ! Hallelujah and Amen.