

Building a Diverse Redemptive Community

Romans 14:1-12

Reverend Ted Warner

September 13, 2026

21st century America is ripe for preaching from Paul's epistle to the Romans as we can relate to the multicultural dynamics of church and society. The Christ community in Rome, in the form of many small communities similar to a house church today, was quite diverse. The major subgroups include Jews and Gentiles. In the earliest Christ communities, Jews would attend Temple on Saturday and meet for the Lord's Supper on Sunday. Eventually they split from the Temple. But by now, many Gentiles are included in the Christ community. We now have people who had completely different cultural backgrounds and experiences of worship their whole lives suddenly gathering together. They had some different values and practices.

Paul, who had not yet been to Rome, as he states in his letter, is encouraging the Jews and Gentiles to honor each other's unique identities while joining together in their common identity in Christ. Some people have strict diets. Paul encourages the others to honor that and make it easier for those who follow the diet. Likewise, those who do not have the strict diet or other practices also should be honored. One question in these communities was whether one needed to become a Jewish proselyte to join in the community. Paul's assertion is that no, the Christ event (Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection) changed all that. If one had to adhere to all Jewish practices, there would have been no need for Christ. So, Jews in this context should continue to worship according to their tradition while simultaneously worshipping with those who practice differently.

Essentially, people have different backgrounds, ideas, and values. It is okay that not everyone agrees on all things. We do need to focus in what we have in common and the understanding that the most important part of our identity is that we are in Christ.

In our congregation that is nearing 200 years of existence, we find people that value different parts of our tradition. We have many spiritual watering holes among us. We have people who highly value our decorations during Advent and Christmas. Others draw from a different well, such as finding ways to serve the less fortunate in our community. It's also okay to enjoy both. Others find the Bazaar the highlight of the church year. Many enjoy putting up the Creche as a way of saying hello to the community that walks or drives by. Many of us put a lot of our personal identity into the boards and committees in which we serve and/or in the gifts we offer. What is necessary for us in all that we do is to remember our superordinate identity in Christ that surpasses everything else about us. This is not to ignore the rest of our identity, but to remember what is most important and what binds us together as one body.

If we get caught up in our differences and, especially, if we fail to integrate them, we fracture and separate from one another. We find ourselves challenged today as we look at our priorities and seek to make room for all that is important to us. Overall, we are doing well and acknowledging each other's needs. May we continue to do the good work of sharing our sacred

space. Very soon, we will see community choirs and children from other friendly organizations occupy our space with their presence for the joy of many.

I admit I do not fully understand some of the language Paul uses in this passage. He calls one side “weak” and the other “strong” while valuing both sides equally. In addition, Paul is among the “weak” side, coming from his background in 2nd Temple Judaism. Paul is one of the Jews who practices his faith according to the old traditions. I can only think strong in this case must mean, fully partaking in the faith without following all of the old traditions. Anyway, that is still a mystery to me to explore further.

At any point in our faith journey, both for the Roman Christ community and us today, is remembering the mighty acts of God on our behalf. God is in the work of redeeming us all. We look back to the Exodus and the song of the Red Sea today. The lectionary offered a nice choice of following the story of the Hebrew people escaping bondage in Egypt through the sea with the Song of the Red Sea, first sung by Moses, then his sister, Miriam.

In between the Song of the Red Sea and the early Christ community in Rome, there was a psalmist crying out in lament for the hopelessness of exile. You thought you were not getting a psalm today, but here are some words from Psalm 77: “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak... ‘Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? ⁸ Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?’”

Then, the Psalmist recalls God’s wondrous deeds. The despair of lament shifts to hope and remembrance. The Psalmist begins to believe for the best even before God acts. The psalmist continues, “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds... Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” The psalmist recalled the Song of the Red Sea and God freeing his people; a reminder that God would act yet again. These ancient stories are still important to us today.

Paul reminds the Christ community in Rome that God will hold us all accountable. Let’s not spend so much time judging one another, but rather rejoice for being part of God’s people in Christ. Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Let us live for the Lord. Give thanks that we have life and live in community with each other.

The church still has great purpose. I wonder if I poll the whole congregation, just how many purposes we might come up with. But my hope is that we would all understand that we still proclaim the ancient message of God raising the dead to life. That we are people of the resurrection, that we know God breathes life into us and nothing, not despair nor death, nor powers nor principalities of today could ever separate us from the God’s love in Jesus Christ.