

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 17, 2023

GENESIS 50:15-21 | PSALM 103:8-13 | ROMANS 14:1-12 | MATTHEW 18:21-35

A few years ago, Jane Neske came up to me after worship and said she had something she wanted to give me. And she handed me this decorative piece of wood that has Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer printed on it. For those of you who are unfamiliar, the prayer reads, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." This is a prayer that many of us know and pray regularly. In fact, Jane prays it at the beginning of every homily.

The last part of the serenity prayer has always struck me as both the most important and the most difficult. With enough coffee and self-help books, we can psych ourselves up and get some courage. With some breathing exercises and noise-canceling headphones, we can chill out and find serenity. But to know the difference between what we should hold on to and what we should let go of can be a real struggle.

The wisdom to know the difference is also what today's reading from Romans is all about. This community of people is struggling to figure out what their core identity is. What does it mean to be a member of the body of Christ in Rome? What is the thing that holds this community together? How do people identify themselves?

In today's reading, we heard some of the answers people are using to define themselves. Some people think that the community should be defined by what you eat. Some people eat whatever they want. Some people don't eat meat that's been sacrificed to a pagan idol. Some people don't eat meat at all. Other people think it should be about ritual practices. Some people have special days that they do particular rituals. Some people treat the days on their calendar as all the same.

These differences are not inherently bad, but people have started to rank them, to come up with a hierarchy to organize this community. The real members of this community eat x, the sort-of-members eat y. The real members have x calendar, the sort-of-members have y calendar. No surprise, this leads to a lot of arguments.

Enter St. Paul. Now, you could imagine Paul solving this whole thing on their terms. Let's just go down the list and make some decisions. Yes to eating meat. No to special holidays, etc., etc. But instead, he says they're focusing on the wrong things. Stop "quarreling over opinions," he advises. "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat." The issue isn't whether specific practices are good or bad. It's about separating what's essential for our life together from what's just incidental. It's about having the wisdom to tell the difference.

In our tradition, we have a word for the types of incidental issues St. Paul is talking about. We call them "adiaphora."¹ Adiphora is a Greek word that means "undifferentiated." I imagine it as a kind of shrug. It simply means that there isn't one correct or substantively

¹ This is a good summary of this: Amandus Derr, "Adiphora," Christ The King Lutheran Church, accessed September 12, 2023, <https://ctkelc.org/blog/adiaphora>. Also "Holy Communion under Quarantine" by Timothy J. Wengert – Lutheran Quarterly, accessed September 12, 2023, <https://www.lutheranquarterly.org/?p=5561>.

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better way to do things. We might have a preference for how we like to do things, but people who do them differently aren't necessarily wrong.

We don't have arguments about eating meat or marking holidays very much, but you can probably imagine some other things we do within this community that we might call "adiaphora." If and when you make the sign of the cross over yourself. Whether the presiding minister chants or speaks the liturgy. What instruments we use in worship. Whether we use the Lord's Prayer with "you" or "thou." How we sing the psalms. I could go on, but you get the idea.

Having some concept of adiaphora has a lot of advantages to it. For one, it keeps you from having endless arguments over things that aren't really important. Imagine what it would be like if the person in the pew next to you kept tapping you on the shoulder and saying, "Well, actually..." It would be totally insufferable.

Second—we'll come back to this idea—it allows us to have diversity in our practices. We don't all have to do things exactly the same way. Think about our synod for a moment. Imagine if everyone in our synod had to do things exactly the same way. That would include congregations like ours as well as urban congregations and rural congregations and multilingual congregations and new start ministries, not to mention the Lutheran Social Services assisted living facility in West Caldwell, the immigration detention ministry in Edison, and our youth summer camp at Cross Roads. What would it be like if we had to do everything the exact same way? It would be a disaster. Having some concept of adiaphora means that we can adapt our practices to fit our context.

At first glance, this kind of variation seems like "live and let live." It makes me think of the old Outback Steakhouse slogan: No Rules, Just Right. But what Paul is talking about is not chaos and disorder. It's diversity and freedom. What makes this freedom instead of just chaos is that it has a center to it.

In our tradition, this is how we describe the center. This is how the reformers put it. "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments."² In other words, the essentials are the font where we are grafted into the body of Christ, the word that we hear as both commands and promises, and the table where we are strengthened for service in God's world. Font, word, and table.

What do those three elements have in common? They are the places where God creates faith in us. They're the encounters, the actions where we become God's own. We are grafted. We are addressed. We are fed. Sometimes we call these acts the "means of grace." Because they are where we meet the "presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit as the gift of the Father."³

If we know that's the center, we can start to discern what is essential from what is incidental. What is essential is not a common language or shared traditions or similar

² Augsburg Confession Article VII. This definition of the church is also why we can build full communion partnerships with other church bodies such as the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

³ Principle 1 A of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, ed., *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

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spiritual practices. What is essential are the means of grace by which God creates, upholds, and enlivens our community. The means by which we become God's own.

If you were to take a road trip around the synod and visit every ministry location—about one hundred and fifty altogether—you would see a bunch of different ways of doing things. Some you would like, some you wouldn't like, some would leave you scratching your head. But you would always encounter a community with font, word, and table the center.

That center allows us to see the diversity of our expressions and practices not as a threat, but as a gift. As Paul reminds us, the reason we show hospitality to others is because at the font, through the word, and around the table "God has welcomed them." So whenever we encounter someone who does something differently than we do, we don't need to try to outrank them in our hierarchy. But instead, we can have a posture of curiosity, openness, and hospitality.

And so as we live and love and serve together, we rest assured that there are no "right" kinds of people and "wrong" kinds of people in the body of Christ. Only people who share in Christ's baptism, are shaped by God's word, and are sent from the table by the Spirit's power. People belong to God before they belong to us.

There is a distinction between what is essential and what is incidental to our community. There is a delta between the ways we often encounter others and the way God does in Christ. But at the font, through the word, and around the table, God gives us the wisdom to tell the difference.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor