

October 26, 2014 “Both....At The Same Time” Romans
14:1-12

The events this past week in Ottawa cause me to be a little bit more meditative than is probably my usual habit. It is a fairly normal thing. We try to make sense of things that defy explanation. As surely as it is difficult to provide rational explanation for one person running up to Parliament Hill with a gun with the intent of creating mayhem, it is difficult to rationalize the death of Canadian soldiers on home soil, simply going about their lives and their duty, wearing the colours that represent their work as members of our military services. And yet it seems we have to try. Christians are by the nature of our faith, thinkers. We think about things. We think deeply on things.

I was asked yesterday morning if I would be commenting on the murder of cpl Curillo, and the assault on Parliament. Thoughtlessly I said, “No I will probably leave that for the Remembrance Season. After all it is not far off.” And then I opened the book to my chosen text....chosen before the events of Thursday Morning. And here we are. Like you I search for answers. And like you I fail to come up with a lot of answers. If we ever do get an “explanation”, I suspect that it will be that the man with the gun was a deeply disturbed

individual. And still the question will nag at us, where does such a seemingly senseless killing fit into our Christian understanding of life, and death, and life eternal?

It is my opinion that Romans 14 helps. I am going to highlight 4 things I find in this passage that are important to remember. From verse 1..”Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgement on disputable matters.” There is no question this is a verse written by the apostle Paul to Christians about living with other Christians, in other words sharing in the life of the church. The message of that verse seems terribly simple and in fact to have nothing to do with the events at the War Memorial in Ottawa. Bear with me.

The church reflects the makeup of our community, our society, our culture and our nation. We are not peas in a pod, although we tend to speak as though that were the case. Sine if us may think we are more mature than others....more committed. Beware such thinking. It is notheworthy that the apostle speaks to those who are tempted to think they are stronger than their brothers and sisters and not the other way round. And what does he say to those who think they are stronger? Accept those who are weaker and don't pass judgement on them, especiallywhen you get into the area of disputeable matters. Things that you can argue about, things that seem to allow for multiple explanations.

Among other things Paul is telling us it is more important to celebrate our common ground than it is to underline the things we could debate or argue over. It is the major case for unity. He is saying recognize there is going to be diversity in the church. I think we can also expand that thought to recognize there is more diversity in our nation than there ever we dreamed. And diversity did not kill cpl Curillo. Senselessness did. Violence did. Was it extremism, or just plain craziness. I was moved by the image of the Imam, standing at the tomb of the unknown soldier offering prayers. He is not my brother in Christ, and yet, we had more in common in that moment than I ever would have expected. I was angered that a mosque was defaced in my Canada. And I was moved that a band of citizens gathered to clean up the mess, singing our national anthem as they did so. I am probably abusing the text, but if there is a lesson about unity and how to be unified when we are culturally and even religiously diverse, as Canada is.....surely this is it. The call to be accepting , once upon a time we learned the word tolerant, treasuring what we have in common rather than what we may disagree over and debate without hope of resolution. The formula for unity in the church, is surely a formula that can work in our nation, in our society, to the benefite of all.

In the second verse of the passage before us, the apostle turns to the matter of eating. As we here are well

aware the church does a lot of eating. I sometimes conclude we look for reasons to sit down over food and drink as surely as we look for reasons to worship, and to be engaged in service to others. This morning we will be enjoying a lunch together. The surface reason, the visible reason is the 16 years that Dorothy Scholten has given St. Andrew's in serving as an elder. Beneath that obvious reason to celebrate with food, is the other reality, that it is in the eating of a meal together, that we get to do and say the stuff that builds relationships. And verse 2 of Romans 14 makes it plain that even in the time of the apostle Paul this kind of fellowship building was a part of the life of the church.

Here is what lies behind the teaching we find here. Ritual sacrifices were not part of the traditions of the new movement with its focus on salvation through faith in Jesus. But the vast majority of these Christians were formally very active Jews. Sacrificial offerings were part of the Temple ritual. In the pagan rituals that surrounded the Jewish community, meat was offered in sacrifices. The burnt offerings offered to idols were not reduced to ash. They were cooked with care. The odours of roasted meat were offered to the gods. Some of the meat was consumed by priests and others and the excess, because there was always leftovers....were sold in the marketplace. Roasted meat was a bargain.

Some Christians said no way. This meat was offered to other gods. Some said that's their problem. I believe in Jesus and I like to eat meat. And there was more than a little temptation for the two factions to argue heatedly over who was living the holy life of a believer and who was not. And by now you should be asking yourself what point is he going to make out of this bbqued meat text? It is a very basic insight. Christians have a higher responsibility than anyone else in the nation, the province, and the community to promote unity than anyone else. On the the tolerance index, we are called by the apostle to be more tolerant than anyone else. More eager to find common ground. The least interested party in promoting division. Division is serious business. The promotion of revenge is achieved at a very minimal cost. Paul urges his flock, the audience to whom he writes not to go there. That does not mean anything goes. It does not mean we believe other religions are valid. I return to the words I chose carefully....we are called to be more tolerant than anyone else while adhering to Jesus.

I want to share a story with you, and surprise, surprise it comes from a movie. As the movie Forest Gump comes to a close, Forest wrestles with a really hard question. His Momma, always told him he was special. He is not an intelligent man. Life has taken him to college on a football scholarship, because he was fast. He was decorated for bravery

after his experience in Vietnam, because he was brave. He saved lives. He succeeded in business because he worked hard, refused to give up....and had faith. He has done many things. Because of his faithfulness to her, he married his beloved Jenny, and lost her to the illness that took her life. So he asks the question, was Momma right, do we all have a destiny, a purpose for living under God's direction....or is life more like a feather drifting on the wind, at one moment lifted to great heights, swept to the four compass points, brought down to kiss the grass at his feet, and then soaring once again up into the clouds. Here is Forest's conclusion. It is profound. He says, I think, maybe it's both...maybe its both at the same time. I think the apostle Paul says that this way....vs. "If we live we live to the Lord...Jesus. If we die....we die to the Lord...Jesus. So whether we live or die, we are the Lord's, we belong to Jesus. There are times when we see things so clearly. There are moments when life is so hurt filled, angering and confusing. Through it all Jesus is the constant. We are his through faith, whether we understand what is happening or not.

Let us pray;

Lord we have experienced this past week. We have questions that remain unanswered. We have such a sense of grief and loss. And in many cases we are angry. Lead us by

your Holy Spirit. Keep our feet on the footpath of faith, for all its challenges. See us through it all until we rest in your Presence. Amen