

# A Matter of Prospective

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## **Romans 14:1-12**

“We do not live to ourselves....” It’s hard to imagine anyone making a much more radical statement in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sonoma County, indeed in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Perhaps I am misreading modern culture, or am getting just a bit cynical, but it sure seems to me that the prevailing understanding of our culture is that we do indeed live for ourselves, that the individual in his or her autonomy, individuality and detachment is the sole center of all meaning. Thus, the most important aspect of truth becomes, not whether or not it actually happens to be true, but whether or not I personally feel it to be true. We see this from the ongoing and at times ridiculous argument over climate change and global warming, to the never-ending debate over evolution to Affordable Health Care. Forget the science, forget the facts, I know what I believe, and my truth is the only truth!

I recall a scene from Ibsen’s play, *Peer Gynt*. It focuses on this very issue. In the closing scene, Peer Gynt proclaims that the inmates of an asylum are “beside themselves.” Nonsense, insists another character. “It is here that men are most themselves. Themselves and nothing but themselves, sailing with outspread sails of self. Each is shut up in himself. None has a care for others’ woes or cares what any other thinks. We are ourselves in thought and voice. Ourselves... up to the very limit!”

Charlie Brown is sharing something he read in the newspaper: “It says here that young people of today don’t believe in any causes.” Lucy responds, “That’s not true at all! I believe in a cause. I believe in me! I’m my own cause! If I’m not a cause what is? I believe in the cause of good ol’ me. That’s the cause I believe in! I’m the best cause I know and I believe in that cause! I’m the...”

As Charlie Brown walks away, all he can do is mutter, “Good grief!” But Lucy is not a bad spokesperson for much of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. What matters is me and my needs, my truth. But, curiously, Paul doesn’t seem to think so. He speaks a radically countercultural words when he suggests, in his Letter to the Romans, that maybe it isn’t all about me.

Clearly the church at Rome was having some issues. It seems that, in the church, what people chose to eat or not eat could be quite controversial, even divisive. Apparently there was a lot of diversity in the Roman church, including Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. And each group had its cause. Did a true believer eat meat or was he or she a vegetarian? Were Jewish dietary and Sabbath laws to be followed, or not? Seems there was a lot of finger pointing, a lot of judging. “I am a better Christian than you! My way or the highway. My truth is the only truth. How can you be a good and faithful person if you don’t believe what I believe and practice religion the way I practice it?” Kind of sad, isn’t it, that after 2000 years we are still having those arguments, people even being killed for not confessing the proper faith.

But back to our text. Paul refuses to take sides, refuses to comment on who in the church is right or wrong, strong or weak. Instead he argues that there is a third way, and in so doing he provides a new perspective on our identity, who we really are. He acknowledges that devout people can hold radically different convictions and still be good and faithful people. There is no need for us to demonize each other. And why? Because ultimately we are not defined by what we believe, what we eat, how we worship or what we do. We find our true identity, our true self, elsewhere: “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. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God... each of us will be accountable to God.” Paul recognizes that for Christians, there is no room for self-centeredness, for us versus them, because our life is centered, not on me and my needs, my truth, but on Christ. How easily we forget that.

In John Marquand's novel, *Point of No Return*, Charlie Gray, after years of apple-polishing and bucking for promotion and dedicating his energies to a single goal, finally gets to be vice-president of the fancy little New York bank where he works. But soon there comes that terrible moment when he realizes that this is not really what he wanted after all – the prize he has spent his life trying to win suddenly turns to ashes in his hands. His promotion assures him and his family of all the security and standing he has always sought, but he comes to realize that he is not made to live on status and salary alone; that something crucially important is missing from his life even though he is not sure what it is. So often, it seems, we live our lives from the outside in rather than from the inside out, letting culture, family, media, profession define for us who we are and what gives our lives value.

New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, shares this story: "Several years ago I was told a story about a three-year-old girl. She was the first born and only child in her family. But now her mother was pregnant again and the little girl was very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. This request made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby's arrival, so they realized they could let their daughter do this.

"They let her go into the baby's room, shut the door, then raced to listen to the intercom. They heard their daughter's steps moving across the baby's room, imagined her standing over the baby's crib, and then they heard her say to her three-day-old brother, 'Tell me about God...I've almost forgotten.'"

Says Borg, "The story is both haunting and evocative, for it suggests that we come from God, and that when we are very young, we still remember this, we know this. But the process of growing up, of learning about this world, is a process of increasingly forgetting the one from whom we came and in whom we live." And so it is that eventually our lives become centered on any number of things – including myself – but God. We forget who we really are. Former United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, recalls that every day, as he and his sister were leaving home to go to school, their mother would call after them, "Remember who you are!" I think Paul is pleading with us to remember. We do not belong to the whims and expectations of the world or to the selfish inclinations of the all-powerful self. We belong to, we are claimed and loved by, are accountable to... God.

The late and much missed Henri Nouwen liked to speak of each of us as God's chosen, as God's beloved. In his words, "When I say that as the Beloved, we are God's chosen ones, I mean that we have been seen by God from all eternity, seen as unique, special, precious beings... From long before we were born and became part of history, we existed in God's heart... the eyes of love had seen us as precious, as of infinite beauty, as of eternal value... We have to dare to reclaim the truth that we are God's chosen ones, even when our world does not choose us... Long before any human being saw us, we were seen by God's loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us laugh or cry, we were heard by our God. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we were spoken to by the voice of eternal love."

This is what Paul is saying. He calls us to a new life which is really our true life – a life of reconnection with God – the life of the returned prodigal welcomed home, the life of the bent woman, standing up and restored to health, the life of Lazarus, raised from the dead. In the words of Borg: "This is a life of freedom – freedom from the voices of all the would-be lords of our lives; a life of joy – the joy of the exuberant life; a life of peace – the peace of reconnection to what is; a life of love – the love of God for us and in us."

"We do not live to ourselves..." The hard truth is not if you will give your life but to whom will you give it. And how tempting it is to offer ourselves up on lesser altars before smaller gods. "Tell me about God. I've almost forgotten." This life, this day, is a God-given opportunity to remember, to affirm who we really are, to claim the truth of our belovedness and say "Yes" to the One who has called us from nothing into something and claimed us as God's very own.