

What Faith Asks of Us *Let's Be Real*

Romans 14:1-12

September 24, 2023

Hey, Church...Stop me if you've ever heard this one before. *We need more young people! How can we attract them? Why aren't there more young adults in our pews?*

I've heard it. Back when I was young (many, many years ago), looking for a new church to serve, I noticed a trend among congregations seeking new pastors. An assumption: *If we call a young pastor, they will bring young members. And (here's the unspoken part) we won't have to do anything different to attract them!*

Now friends, just to be clear, saying *we need more young people*...not a strategy. Neither, frankly, is calling a young pastor.

When I served a congregation in Atlanta, we decided we wanted to reach out to folks in their early twenties. Recognizing we had to start somewhere, I contacted several recent college graduates who had grown up in the church and were living in the area again after graduation. I met four of them for coffee together. I knew all their parents and some of their grandparents but had never met any of them. In conversation, they expressed a real desire for deep, thick community. They professed their love for the church and the foundation it had provided them, a genuine interest in growing in faith. When I asked them about roadblocks to returning to church, they did not mince words. *Judgment.* For starters, they didn't necessarily want to be associated with some of the labels placed on "church people." They had friends who had experienced rejection and bitterness in church. And, perhaps most personally, they were concerned about the reception they would receive if they showed up.

I listened. But then, I encouraged them to come to church anyway. They all agreed that they would consider it. I had all but given up when, about a month later, three of them walked into the back doors of the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. I smiled, perhaps a little too obviously. I might have even waved awkwardly from the chancel. *Look at that— young people in the pews! I bet they're glad they called me as their pastor!*

My soaring hopes came crashing down one hour later. I was on my way, parting the crowd, to greet these three prized worshipers, but a member of the church had gotten to them first. And, as I approached, I heard this woman (who had known these three young adults their whole lives) say to the young man who had first voiced his apprehension in the coffee shop, "Well, well, well, well, well. I'm surprised the roof didn't collapse. It's such a shock to see you here!"

I watched him. His shoulders slumped. His eyes made contact with his shoes. His smile evaporated. And I knew in that moment we'd never see him again. What is it about us, we humans, that causes us to turn to shame so quickly?

The church in Rome was located in the heart of imperial power, and it was, by virtue of its location, a diverse community. It included both Jews and Gentiles who had little in common with each other beyond their newfound faith in Jesus. Apparently, the Apostle Paul, who did not found the church, had never visited the church, has learned somehow that these two groups were criticizing and judging each other for their meal choices and their preferences on worship schedule. Paul has a simple message: *Stop it.* You are

letting your disagreements undermine God's call to welcome. Stop judging each other.

Judgment. It was a problem then. It is a problem now.

Now, I want to be clear on this *before* the emails roll in. The witness of scripture is not ambiguous about human sinfulness. All of us fall short of God's design. All of us miss God's intention for our lives. All of us break God's commandments. We fail to live in ways that bring God joy. All of us. Often.

And I believe scripture is equally clear on this point: it is not the role of humankind to occupy a place of judgment over other broken and fallible people. Full stop. In fact, that's how the letter to the Romans begins. Paul creatively and exhaustively catalogs a list of particularly Gentile sins. It is as if Paul, standing in front of the congregation, divides them in half and then spends time highlighting the sins of one group in front of the other. As the list grows, you can sense the tension doing the same. Righteous pride on behalf of some. Shame and anger from others. Paul continues his list, naming only the sins that Gentiles commit, for quite some time. And then, just when the tension has reached its peak, he flips the script. Here's what he writes: *therefore, you have no excuse, no matter who you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself.* In other words, the act of judging is deserving of judgment.

The Old Testament prophets deliver the same message. Perhaps you remember Isaiah's insistence that God's people stop pointing fingers and speaking evil of each other. Judging others. Pointing fingers. Speaking harshly. These are not grand acts of cruelty. Certainly not crimes. Indeed, they have even been normalized in our time. And yet Paul and the prophets command us: *stop it.*

If you've ever experienced judgment, I would wager you remember the feeling, the subtle way we can be made to feel less than, out of place, unwelcome, not enough. Well, well, well, well, well...

If you've ever participated in this kind of judgment or exclusion, you know its enticement. It can feel so good to be a part of the in-crowd, to pile on the criticism of an individual or perhaps a whole group of people. Our judgment tends to intensify as it accumulates. Criticism creates contempt. Disagreement yields to condemnation. Perhaps not grand acts of cruelty and yet so deeply damaging to the bonds of trust and connection that hold us together.

Whenever someone tells me that the Church is full of hypocrites, my response is this: you are right, and we're always looking for one more! Now, that flippant answer underscores a spiritual reality. Not one of us is without sin. All of us have fallen short. And in the Church, one of the ways we fall short is by judging others' shortcomings. If you intend to build a community completely free of hypocrites, you are likely to end up lonely.

At our best, we're trying to do better in here. At our best, we keep showing up, week after week, trying to love God and all our neighbors knowing that we will fail, and yet committing to try again. At our best, we name and acknowledge the ways we get it wrong. We confess our shortcomings, and we seek reconciliation with those whom we have wronged. At our best, we're trying to be real. In a world that teaches us to hide what is broken or painful or difficult, to deflect our weakness by fixating on the flaws of somebody else, we're trying to do it differently. Not aiming for perfection, but faithfulness.

A couple of weeks ago, Perry Bacon Jr. wrote an essay that got my attention. His title was, "I left the Church—and now I long for a 'church of the nones.'" Bacon describes how he grew up in Louisville where his father served as the assistant pastor for their small congregation. His family never missed a Sunday service, and when Perry was accepted into college, the congregation passed the plate. They took up a collection to support him. In the years since, Bacon has felt increasingly alienated by the extremist voices claiming to speak for all Christians and the political

divisions in the church. He has fallen away from active involvement as a young adult. He names activities that provide some of what he's missing, things like weekly farmers markets and professional happy hours—these consistent gatherings with people who share values and interests.

And yet, Bacon confesses to feeling an absence, what he describes in the piece as a “church-sized hole” in his life. He concludes, “Many Americans, including me, were once part of churches that were an essential part of our lives. It seems strange to me that America...is abandoning this institution as opposed to reinventing [it].”

What I want to tell the author is that he'd be welcome here. Not because we will get it right, but because we'll be real. And what I want to tell *you* is this: there are many people here today, and many others who will hear these words, for whom Church is not easy. Statistics tell us that many have simply slipped away, and that is on us. At least partially. We've got to stop the subtle shaming, the judgment in all its insidious forms. We've got to stop giving our major attention to minor issues. We've got to stop allowing disagreement to be a cause for division.

Church, we can do better. We can be real, sharing our lives as broken and beautiful as they are, in ways that open us to growth and meaning. Here's the truth Paul passionately proclaimed:

We *all* belong to God.

So, *why do you pass judgment on someone else's servant?*

We all belong to each other.

So, *why do you pass judgement on your own sibling?*

God's children. No exceptions. No space for shame.

Oh, by the way. The sanctuary roof did not collapse that Sunday. You probably knew that. But here's the surprise. It was not the last time that young man came to church. He stuck with us. We started that group for people in their early twenties, and not long after,

he brought a friend to one of our monthly meetings. The group grew in numbers and in depth. The two of them kept showing up, month after month, week after week. In fact, the last time I was in that sanctuary—in July of 2018—I was there to officiate their wedding. A dozen members of our young adult group were there too. We took a picture together. You know who else was there? The woman who had been worried about the roof. Just a few months later, she placed her hand on his shoulder on the morning of his ordination as an elder in the church. In that sanctuary, still standing, roof still intact.

Now I know it doesn't always go like that. But, Church, we need to hear and tell *these* stories. Better yet, we need to write them in the way we live and the community we build together. Amen.