

**Receptive Grace
Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Adult Bible Class
September 12, 2021**

“Makes me sick to hear that people who chose not to vax, drove the 4th wave and now will be rewarded.”
Physician responding on Twitter to Alberta’s decision to pay folks to get vaccinated.

“Today is a sad day in the history of Ontario. The government announced today that it will phase in Vaccine Passports. This is not right! It’s time to stand up.” *Federal election candidate on Twitter*

If you have been on any form of social media in the last 6 months, you’ve seen and heard these sorts of statements and more. If you are not on social media, you’ve probably heard similar things from friends and family members. There are always hot-button topics in society, but in recent years few have been as divisive and angry as the division between people who have received the COVID vaccination and those who refuse to be jabbed. It’s affected workplaces and schools, it’s divided families and sadly it is also dividing the church, even here at Holy Cross!

However, it need not be so, especially among Christians! There have always been issues that the evil one would use to sow division among God’s people, but the letters written by St. Paul we find a way forward. This special Bible Class will look at 2 of those passages, 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 15:1-7. The purpose of this session is not to take one side or the other, but to focus upon how we as Christians deal with those with whom we disagree, with the prayer that despite all that would divide us we remain one in Christ.

What the Bible Does Not Teach

1. Intolerance – usually expressed either through expulsion – “Get away from me. I want nothing to do with you because of what you believe to be right” – or subjugation – “If we have a relationship, it will be according to my terms.”
2. Tolerance – or at least not the world’s understanding of tolerance. Worldly tolerance is often a counterfeit. It would teach us to be tolerant of all, except for someone we perceive as being intolerant. In today’s world this often includes a call to abandon any claim to universal truth. The only moral absolute is that there are no moral absolutes.

What the Bible Does Teach – Receptive Grace

In 1 Corinthians Paul deals with a host of practical problems that confronted the Christian community in Corinth. He addresses everything from cliques within the congregation to immorality in the congregation to their observance of the Lord’s Supper, Spiritual gifts, and several other topics as well.

In the midst of all of that, he includes a short chapter regarding the eating of foods offered to idols. On the surface this seems like the least relatable chapter of the letter, as we don’t buy food that has been used in pagan worship rites. Yet, what Paul teaches here, applies not just to the situation in Corinth but to any number of other situations as well.

Broadly speaking the division is between people identified as the “weak” and the “strong.”

- The “Weak” – are people whose decisions are based primarily on conscience. They are not in faith, but eating meat sacrificed to an idol goes against their conscience. “But some through former association

with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled" (1 Corinthians 8:6). We tend to think of a weak conscience as something that belongs to a person who feels little guilt. However, in Paul's mind it is the opposite. A modern parallel might be a Christian who sincerely believes that consumption of alcohol is morally wrong under all circumstances except at the Lord's Table.

- The "Strong" – are people who rely upon knowledge to inform their faith. "We know that an 'idol has no real existence' and that 'there is no God but one.'" (1 Corinthians 8:4) They want to be seen as broad-minded, flexible, and freed from some of the moral scruples that others face.

As Paul tries to sort through these strongly held opinions, it is interesting to see the approach he **does not take**. He does not launch into a lecture about theology and how idols are simply human creations and that any meat sacrificed to idols is just meat that has been cooked on a fancy Bar-B-Q. He does not use knowledge to win an argument. Instead, he says that the folks on all sides have knowledge but that love, rather than argument is the key to dealing with the disagreement.

***'Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge."
This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.'***
1 Corinthians 8:1

Later in the chapter he goes even further reminding us that simply trying to argue with someone until they see our point of view, does not always (or ever) really bring people closer together.

- **"But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." -- 1 Corinthians 8:9**
- **"by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed" -- 1 Corinthians 8:11**
- **"Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience, when it is weak, you sin against Christ" -- 1 Corinthians 8:12**

Instead of using knowledge and argument to convince the members of the congregation who won't eat meat sacrificed to idols, Paul offers another approach. If his eating meat causes others to stumble, he will stop eating meat. Instead of arguing, Paul embraces the position he disagrees with. He loves the people around him so much that he will set aside his rights in order to come along side of others and see the world from their perspective. Later in the letter he summarizes things this way:

- **²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. – 1 Corinthians 9:22-23**

This is receptive grace! It receives the other person, even though there are strong, deep, emotional differences. This does not mean Paul agrees with the other person, but he will go the extra mile or two and enter the other person's world view to receive them with the all-embracing truth of Christ.

This is a subject to which Paul returns near the end of the letter to the Romans. Like the church in Corinth, the church at Rome was filled with Christians of various backgrounds with differing sensibilities when it came to food, holy days, and other matters. Paul calls them beyond passing judgement on each other and urges them to walk in love with each other (Romans 14:13-19). They are to pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.

However, lest one think this is simply to have a kind thought for those we may disagree with, Paul takes things a step further.

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not just to please ourselves.” -- Romans 15:1

The key word here is to “bear with” those with whom we disagree. This does not mean we pretend to agree with things we disagree with, but that we enter intellectually and personally into the position of the other person. Even though we disagree strongly we do all we can to understand the other person’s position, sympathize with it, understand how they have come to it, and see the advantages and strengths of it. We do not exclude the other person because we disagree but seek to enter a deeper more personal relationship with them for the sake of our unity in Christ.

Paul gets at the same point in using different words at the end of this section of Romans. He says:

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” – Romans 15:7

Here the key word is “to welcome” the other person in the sense of “drawing them to yourself” with no inner reservations. Loving them and being close with them even though you may not agree on important things. Paul calls us to adjust our lives, create space in our lives for someone you believe is seriously wrong. This is vastly different from what the world calls tolerance. We are not called to accept the other person’s belief, but to accept the other person. Worldly tolerance says we accept the other person’s belief but live your life the way you want to live it. The Gospel calls us to something much more profound – we disagree, but change we our lives so that we can come along beside others without reservation for the sake of our unity in Christ. Receptive Grace!

This is the love Christ has shown to us! The Holy Son of God, the one who is truly strong, enters into the weakness of our humanity, draws near to us, bears with us, understands us and loves is all the way to hell and back again so that we might be united to our Heavenly Father despite the enmity caused by our sin.

What does this look like in real life? In late August a medical website called statnews.com, published an article by Dr. Jay Baruch an emergency room physician from Rhode Island in which he talks about the difficulties he faces as he deals with patients who disagree with him about COVID or other matters. At the end of the article he has this to say:

“To persuade people, to get them to think, you must first get them to feel. ... Let’s tone down the rhetoric and create opportunities whose purpose isn’t to convince people with contrary opinions that they’re behaving irresponsibly, but to invite them into our lives and appreciate why each of us might feel morally injured.

I believe there remain islands of shared values and purposes for building further discussions. The only way out of this pandemic is by supporting one another, shifting the focus from judgements about right and wrong and exploring ideas that ask what degree of discomfort each of us is willing to accept to put the current crisis behind us.”

In Christ we are united by the greatest love the world has ever seen. We have been received and welcomed despite our sin, rebellion, and selfishness. We have experienced Receptive Grace. As his people we show that same grace to one another. Amen.