

## 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

17 July 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

*Romans 6:14 / James 2:10-11*

*Romans 16:1-3 / 1 Timothy 2:11-12*

*1 Timothy 6:1-2 / Philemon 1:15-16*

*1 Timothy 5:23 / Ephesians 5:18*

*Galatians 3:28*

According to the New Testament, were women permitted to be church leaders? To speak or prophesy or teach? What was the New Testament take on slavery? Is drinking alcohol a sin according to the Bible? What's our relationship as Christians to the Jewish scriptures, in particular the Mosaic Law?

If you paid attention to our various scripture readings this morning, the answer to all those

questions seems to be: it depends. It depends on which book or letter you read, who the writer was, and who the audience was. And that isn't just an Old Testament vs. New Testament thing either where we had one understanding of the demands and expectations of the faith and then Jesus came and set us straight.

All 8 of the scripture excerpts we heard this morning come from

New Testament epistles – letters written in the mid- to late first century, after Jesus' death, to groups of Christians trying to figure out how to live out their faith in the world of the Roman Empire. They are all written around the same time, to similar groups of Christians facing comparable social settings. And yet they give different instructions and advice.

So if you're a first century Christian woman who felt called to be a leader in the church, was it just luck of the draw if you lived in Rome where Paul says that's okay or if you happened to live instead in Lystra where Timothy was from, in

which case women were not permitted to speak in church at all? What about if you had the unfortunate lot in life of being someone else's slave? Can you go ask the slave owner for freedom because in Exodus God frees people from slavery and Paul urges Philemon to free his slave Onesimus? Or are you doomed to live your life in servitude to another, and, to top it off, regard your master as "worthy of all honor?"

I think this is more than just something interesting to ponder. Rather, I think the way we wrestle with those questions, the way we make sense out of them, has a lot to do with how well we do or

do not function as a church family today.

Because just like the writers of those different epistles, we, too, approach our faith from different points of view, informed by different backgrounds, experiences and contexts. Think about the issue of wine for a minute. I suspect that my views on whether or not drinking wine was okay might be different if I grew up in a household with someone who regularly abused alcohol and took it out on the people around him than they would if I grew up spending my summers working in the family vineyard.

At least in our culture, in religion as in politics, we seem to do

a pretty darn good job of putting ourselves and others into boxes and then using those boxes to judge whether or not someone is a friend or enemy. If someone new walked into the church this morning and just happened to be wearing, say, a lapel pin that supported one or the other of the presumptive presidential nominees for November, how many of us would immediately presume we knew what they believed about issues like abortion, capital punishment, legalization of recreational drugs, social services, foreign policy, immigration, and a whole host of other issues? And if

that box doesn't happen to be the same one in which we find ourselves, what kind of foundation is that relationship going to start out on?

Look, it will not come as news to any of you that those of us worshipping here this morning do not all agree on a lot of things that might be important to us personally. There are other churches for whom widespread agreement on politics or theology was all but a requirement to be a part of that church family.

I can recall two churches in particular I visited in my adult life. One was an Episcopal church in New York in

which the entire sermon was spent bashing George W. Bush and by extension anyone who voted for or supported him. The other was a Baptist church in North Carolina where the whole sermon was talking about how foolish the idea of evolution was and how stupid anyone must be to believe in it. The people I spoke with in both churches were very nice. They were welcoming. They were glad to have me join them. But neither one of them was a place I would want to regularly be a part of. Why? Because despite being on opposite ends of the theological or political spectrum, they both

seemed to operate under the idea that there was only one right thing to believe, only one correct way to experience the faith.

As frustrating as it might be at times, I am glad that there is some ambiguity in the Bible. I am glad that different ideas and opinions are represented, even when those opinions may be at odds with each other while both claiming to represent God. I am glad of that because you and I, each one of us in here, has different ideas and opinions, and yet we **all** represent God to those around us. And I am glad to be part of a church that embodies that.

Of course we have not always done the best job of celebrating that. We have sometimes put others in our church family into boxes, and maybe even sent the message that because they believed something different than we did, that maybe they were not as valued.

But I can tell you that I am here, in this church family, because I value diversity over homogeneity, I think it is important that we work to remain in community with people who believe differently than we do, not only because it pushes us to learn and grow, but because it teaches us how to be better citizens of this world by loving

and respecting those who are not in our particular political or theological camp, or who are simply different from us in any number of ways.

God created us all, and God created us all different. The biblical writers, and those that put together the canon of scripture that we call our Bible, knew that God would not be well represented by only one story, one view, one idea. Just like no one person, save Jesus Christ, fully embodies God.

But Christianity hasn't survived two millennia by booting out or killing everyone who didn't think and believe one particular way, even though we've

tried a few times in our history. But if we can accept that different biblical writers may have had different ideas about drinking wine, or slavery, or the role of women in leadership, yet still affirm that through their writings we believe we can learn something about the character and nature of God, then perhaps we can try to treat one another with the same grace and forbearance, celebrating together this wonderful community that God has entrusted to us.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.