

The Rabbi's Gift

ROMANS 14:1-13

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“I love you, you’re perfect, now change.” This was the title of the popular off-Broadway musical that ran for twelve years from 1996 to 2008. It’s a comedy made up of a generally unrelated series of vignettes revolving around romance and relationships. But it could be the theme of many churches today, couldn’t it? “I love you, you’re perfect, now change.”

Today, we are talking about one the favorite pastimes of Christians everywhere, and this passage -- this letter Paul wrote to the early church in Rome, shows that we haven’t changed much in 2,000 years!

I heard a preacher brag recently that he could split nearly any church in less than two minutes. How? By starting a discussion on which of the following items are sinful (or at best unspiritual):

- Drinking alcohol
- Smoking cigarettes or cigars
- Gambling
- Dancing
- Watching R-rated movies
- Listening to secular music
- Watching MMA (Mixed Martial Arts)
- Using birth control
- tattoos or piercings
- marriage equality
- Sending your kids to public school
- Owning a luxury car or other extravagant possessions
- Working on Sunday – working on Saturday!
- Observing Halloween or whether kids should read Harry Potter!

Now, these things are not specifically addressed in scripture. But how often do Christians practically come to blows over these issues! We seem to have a habit of fixating on non-essential issues. Maybe you’ve heard the saying, “The

main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” That’s good advice. But I would also add this, “The second thing is to keep second things second.” You’ve probably heard me say this before, and if you haven’t you will... “It’s all about priorities.” When we put all our energy into issues that are mainly opinions and ignore important ones -- is it any wonder we’re losing people because the world thinks Christians are judgmental!

Throughout history of the church we see the same problem – the attitude that most of us share that while God is clearly pleased with the way I live MY life, there are these other people around...people that drink beer and play cards, they smoke or they swear, they work on Sundays, or they wear lipstick, they have long hair, or they have short hair. It’s an endless list. And the church has never managed to come to terms with them in spite of today’s passage which spells it out pretty clearly, I think.

In preparing for today’s message, I came across the following story about judging and not judging. It’s poignant enough to tell the story and have it be the message. Just the story – by itself. But then the sermon wouldn’t be quite long enough – and I know how much you enjoy a long rambling message – who doesn’t?

This story is taken from 2004 article by [Rabbi Jeffrey Summit](#) of Tufts University written in to go with that year’s Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, also called *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment; it is a day of reflection and introspection.

The story is about a certain monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once it was a great order, but as a result of the waves of anti-monastic persecution in the 17th and 18th centuries and the rise of secularism and humanism in the 19th century, all of its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the woods surrounding the monastery there was a little cabin that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a retreat. The old monks could always sense when the rabbi was visiting the cabin. "The rabbi is in the woods, the

rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. And as the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, he decided to visit the rabbi and ask if he had any advice that might save the old monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of this visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "Yes. I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. When the time came for the abbot to leave, they embraced one another. "It has been a wonderful thing that we have talked after all these years," the abbot said. "But is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded, "I have no advice to give you." But then the rabbi paused and said quietly to the abbot, "But, there is one thing I have to tell you: One of you is the Messiah."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—he said that one of us was the Messiah! Maybe it's something from Jewish mysticism. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks began to think about this and wondered whether the rabbi's words could actually be true? The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, who is it? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant that Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Jonathan! Jonathan gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Jonathan is virtually always right, often very right. Maybe the rabbi did

mean Brother Jonathan, but surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then almost mysteriously he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Could Philip be the Messiah? Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? Oh God, me?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might actually be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, it so happened that people occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. And as they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. And it happened that within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirit.

You can draw your own conclusions from the story. "How we judge and treat the people around us, on a simple day to day level, not only determines our relationship with them but the very quality of life in our community. Whether that community is the workplace, a neighborhood, our family, a sorority or fraternity, or a church, our little worlds – our communities -- can be transformed when we look at another human being and really see them with the eyes of Christ: this

person is a beloved child of God. This person has worth. They are valuable. There are things I can learn from this person.

I was puzzled when I read that the Mishna – a main authority of Jewish law -- teaches that we should judge everyone. BUT, we should be judging them on the positive side of the scale. In fact, in the rabbinic tradition, this approach to how we judge other people is seen as one of the definitions of wisdom: Who is the person who is wise? The one who has the ability to learn something from every person. A wise person is able to really hear and appreciate that every individual can make a valuable contribution to our life, to our community."

The apostle Paul was Jewish. And I like to look at all of Romans 14 as "The Rabbi's (Paul's) gift. It includes verse 13 on the front of the bulletin – *“Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another”* And my new favorite, 4:19 & 20: *“Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building. ²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.”*

Think about how much we miss when we focus on judging based on opinions, without looking at the whole person. Dave Barry put it so well, and this is the thought of the week this week: *“There's nothing wrong with enjoying looking at the surface of the ocean itself, except that when you finally see what goes on underwater, you realize that you've been missing the whole point of the ocean. Staying on the surface all the time is like going to the circus and staring at the outside of the tent.”*