

“THE IMPERFECT CHURCH”

Revelation 2:1-7; Romans 14:1-13

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Don't you love being right? I don't just mean that feeling when you get all the answers right on the test. I'm not talking about filling in the last space on your crossword puzzle or the self-righteous kind of right as in "I was right and you were wrong." I'm talking about the kind of right that comes on an anniversary and you're in the right restaurant with the right person eating just the right food with the right wine. You know the feeling that says, there's no other place I'd rather be in this moment. It can happen on vacation as you enjoy the wonders of God's creation or the marvels of human creativity. It happens in celebrations with friends, at graduations, at births and baptisms, at weddings and retirements, even sometimes at the funeral of someone whose long life has been a blessing to all around.

That's what the members of the church of Ephesus must be feeling when they get this letter from John. There they are: the first church mentioned. There they are one of only seven churches with their own golden lampstand in God's court. You're being approved for your hard work, your patient endurance, your recognition and rejection of evildoers, your knowing what is right. Wouldn't you like to be that church?

But you know this sense of being in the right place, sense of deep satisfaction, doesn't always last very long. There's always another test, a crossword puzzle you can't seem to finish. There's going to be a disagreement not too many days after that perfect anniversary celebration. So many young people are discovering that the "job in their field" doesn't always come as fast as you want it. The morning after the party can be a painful awakening.

And John writes, "But I have this against you... you have abandoned the love that you had at first." Maybe you've encountered someone who "comes to Christ" later in life and you've noticed the enthusiasm and joy that just bubbles up out of them. Their love for Jesus is so bright that you just want to take a step back or two. Those of us who have been in the church from infancy are often suspicious of this religious type. We've seen the enthusiasm fade often enough. And apparently this is the case with the church in Ephesus.

In the early church, conversion to the faith as an adult was more the rule than the exception. But for all of us there are times in our journey when faith seems to be more alive, when we claim it as our own. I remember fondly those days in high school when I first began leading Bible studies. For me, conversation around the scriptures often makes the Word breathe in a way that just reading it on my own doesn't. Even today Bible study in a group draws me back to "my first love."

John writes seven letters in the book of Revelation to the angels of seven churches and they all roughly fit this pattern: approval for some aspect of the church's life together, a grievance, and an urge to repent or hold fast. The letters address churches for which John has almost nothing but approval and others for which he has only disapproval. But even for those churches that are holding fast, John warns of the danger of falling away. Perfection... well, we know that feeling of being in the right place seldom lasts. So the operative word for the

imperfect church is “repent.” It is a practice essential for our life together, for the imperfect church. Repentance can be thought of as a “turning” – a turning away from those things that have gotten us off track and a turning back to a right path. For the imperfect church, direction is the thing that counts.

And when we think about the imperfect church, we can do no better than to look at the church in Corinth. We know more about their problems than any other first century church thanks to these two lengthy letters from Paul written mostly to address disputes and failings.

The people in Corinth were very concerned about doing and believing the right thing... while making sure that others doing the wrong thing should hear about it. There was, in Paul's words, much “quarrelling about opinions.”

The opportunity to eat meat came only on special occasions for those below a certain income level, which was most people. On those high holy days, the priests of Apollo or some other Roman God would sacrifice animals and the meat would be placed in the marketplace for all to enjoy. Otherwise meat was very expensive. So the meat available to your average Corinthian had already been sacrificed to idols.

Now there were some in the church, who would go to these festivals and join in the eating. They were mostly men and some women of business who would use the opportunity to network with others that could benefit their business. These festivals represented their best opportunities to make a profit. Not eating the meat would be awkward for them.

Ironically, these Christian merchants could afford meat at other times. They were in fact your major donors in the church and so they exercised a certain amount of authority. When they reasoned that the gods to whom these sacrifices had been made were in fact no gods at all (since there was only one) and since they weren't real gods, it couldn't be considered a genuine sacrifice... therefore it was permissible to eat the meat... and furthermore the profits from participation benefitted the church. Those who believed differently, argued more straightforwardly that a Christian should not participate in the false religious practices of the Romans.

The issue had become so divisive in Corinth that Paul urges a different answer than the one given here in Romans. Rather than urging each person to be clear in their own minds about the right practice and to not judge each other, he recommends that the Christian merchants abstain from these celebrations for the sake of the others.

So why does Paul say one thing to Rome and something different to Corinth. Isn't he being inconsistent? Or worse, how can the scriptures contradict themselves? And still worse, how am I going to explain this and get us done on time, and get us out of this rabbit hole and back to “the right place.” And worst of all, how can I not go down this other rabbit hole staring at us in the text that seems to imply that vegetarians are “weak.” Maybe if we just keep turning, as the song says, “till we come round right.”

According to vegetarians today, and they are right about this, meat is a problem in the world today. Setting aside the issues of Rome and Corinth, we know that the production of meat is a terribly inefficient process. You could feed more people with the grain used to produce

a pound of meat than you could with that pound of meat. There are certain health deficits associated with eating too much meat. There are ethical issues with raising animals for slaughter. The grazing of large herds of cattle have played a major role in the reduction of true wilderness places. And CFOs (confined feeding operations) are not only cruel to the animals but often result in pollution of land and water. So you see the question concerning whether one should eat meat or only vegetables remains an issue of some concern. Who's got the "right" answer? Isn't it possible that "meat-eaters" are really the "weak" party? On the other hand couldn't a case be made for addressing the "problems" of meat without resorting to total abstinence?

But here I am, rambling on, turning round and round, getting nowhere. So let me turn back to the text. "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds," writes Paul. This is not the same as "agreeing to disagree." It does not suggest that the answer doesn't matter, that one view is as good as the next. It does mean that we have tried to understand the other viewpoint, that we have thought through our own position, and that we "feel" the rightness of our practice.

And that "rightness" consists in this: "if we eat, we do so to honor the Lord; if we abstain, we do so to honor the Lord." When we are in the right place, we are looking into the face of Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul tells the merchants in Corinth to abstain, because they have used their privilege, their freedom in Christ to enhance their power in the faith community and to put down their brothers and sisters of lesser means. Rome had the same differences, but neither view was being used to gain advantage over the other. Paul warns them to not go down that road, to not judge the other; but to let each person stand or fall before the Lord. He warns them because the church is imperfect and it will be tempted to turn its back on Jesus and travel the path of dissension and judgmentalism.

The church has done this countless times. What is the proper way to honor the Sabbath? We have made rules. Don't work on the Sabbath. Don't go to the movies. Don't dance. We've gradually let go of many of these, but we always make new ones. We still judge each other for our taste in music. The last couple of decades, the church has been fighting its worship wars. People stop coming because we sing those contemporary songs or because we don't sing them enough. People stop coming because the pastors talk too much politics or because they don't talk enough.

There's nothing wrong with a few rules and a sense of order, but the rules shouldn't be used to oppress someone else. There was a church that for a while required their ushers to wear tuxedos. For a very long time we required church officers and pastors to desire only a person of the opposite sex, refusing to allow gay and lesbian persons to this kind of service. We called sinful what was in fact a gift from God.

The history of the church could be told as a series of events in which we looked down on others. The inquisition rooted out faithful Christians who had rejected certain dogma of the Catholic Church. The Crusades tried to wrest control of Jerusalem from the "infidels." The history of our life together is a history of imperfections, some trivial, and some with very serious consequences.

Next week we will begin to focus on the countless ways in which we are “better together,” but it seemed appropriate before taking up that topic to acknowledge that in our life together, things are not always perfect. We often find ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time saying and doing the wrong things.

The challenge every church faces is whether or not we are going to allow ourselves to be defined by our imperfections. When our detractors raise the specter of violence in the church’s past, do we just accept the criticism or do we invite them to hear the whole story? Do we tell them about the ministries that have lifted people out of hunger or addiction or crime; ministries that have spoken out against racism and advocated for peace and nurtured children? In our life together, we sometimes hurt each other, sometimes judge one another, and sometimes just disagree too loudly.

When we allow these things to define us, we seal our own fate, we compromise our witness, we turn our backs on the one who loves us and gives us peace and grace, and hope. Christ has freed us for our life together. This is the gospel that we are now free in Christ; but sometimes we choose to wear the chains again that we had cast off. The key to a whole life together is to remember to keep turning. Repent, turn back, John tells the churches in Revelation. Paul tells us to honor the Lord, to refrain from condemning another, and to take care that we are right in our own relationship to the Lord.

Think of it as a dance we do together, a dance of simplicity and freedom as described in the Shaker song, *Simple gifts*:

*Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free
Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
Twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend, we shan’t be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come ‘round right.*

It’s a great feeling to be right, in the right place with the right people doing and saying the right things... looking into the right face, even Jesus Christ. This is what defines our life together, that even when we aren’t getting everything right, our habit of turning gets us back to the one whose love transforms us. In this imperfect life together, may God grant us the grace to keep turning till “we come ‘round right.” Amen.