

At the church conference I attended last week, author and church historian Diana Butler Bass noted the huge shift America is seeing in our demographics, the issues we face, different generational practices and habits, sexual identity, race relations and even the history we share. People are engaging in heated issues as never before.

But the biggest shift she sees is a shift in our relationship with the truth. As Pontius Pilate said to Jesus – “What is truth?” What is the nature of reality? What is the foundation of knowledge? It’s a dangerous world when we can’t even agree on what is truth.

The Apostle Paul in today’s New Testament lesson sees the danger of mistaking opinion for fact, making things up to suit your argument, and failing to have a shared sense of truth, a common knowledge bank to draw from, a conviction that some things just are, and there’s no denying their reality.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul sees the church and society in general struggling with the question, “What is truth?”

In response to this, Paul says, “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.” Now, we don’t know what he meant by “weak in faith,” except to say that some believed one thing and others believed something else. And that these different beliefs had them quarrelling and arguing with one another.

As non-Jewish Gentiles were brought into the faith – whether they were Roman, Greek, or whatever – the Christians who came out of the Jewish tradition, they were adhering to the Religious law they grew up with, and insisting all Christians do the same.

Paul gives two examples from the Law or Torah that people were arguing about: first, whether it was proper in God’s eyes for people to eat certain foods or not, and second, whether the Sabbath day is more sacred than all other days.

For many, the custom of refraining from certain foods and keeping the Sabbath holy was central to their identity as Christians, as children of God. For them, these were nonnegotiables. And here comes Paul saying, “Wait a minute. Let’s look at what’s essential in our beliefs and what is not.”

Well, we can relate to that. There are plenty of issues that Christians argue about with one another, things like abortion, sexual identity, affirmative action, the distribution of wealth, the role of government.

Amid these differences, Paul holds up four essentials that Christians must adhere to, over and above any disagreements we may have. These are welcoming others, accepting them without passing judgment, putting the Lord ahead of ourselves, and examining ourselves for sin and corruption.

First, welcome others, and not for the purpose of quarrelling. When talking with someone who has a different opinion or belief, remember that person is a child of God just as you are, each of us with our own faults, our own misguided beliefs and practices. And still, we welcome them to come alongside us, because as Paul says, “God has welcomed them.”

Second, Paul says, “Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?” Now truth be told, it’s hard for us to not judge others, their behaviors and choices. That’s only human, and Paul knows that.

As Christians, we have opinions and beliefs, but we do not “pass judgment” on others, as if we have the power to bless or condemn. As Paul says, “It is before their own lord that they will stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.”

It’s interesting that the word Paul uses for “able to make them stand” is the same word used to describe God’s power in raising Jesus from the dead, in the resurrection. God’s judgment is always for redemption, for those who are open to it. So, who are we to judge?

After making that point, Paul inserts a little reminder, saying “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord....”

Paul is reminding us that we belong to the Lord, not the other way around. When we come alongside those with different beliefs and practices, it’s not about us. It’s about the Lord and what the Lord is doing in our lives and in the life of the other person. With Jesus, there is no place for self-righteousness.

A pastor was preaching at a youth camp one summer when he felt the Holy Spirit moving through the worship service. So, he gave an altar call at the end of his sermon. Half the congregation came forward.

Seeing one little boy at the altar, the preacher knelt down and said, “Young fellow, what brought you to this altar tonight?” The boy said, “My sins, Sir, my sins.” The pastor looked at him and said, “Move over, my boy, and make room for me.”¹

With Jesus, there is no place for self-righteousness. We all kneel before the Lord in humility and repentance, knowing that we “do not live to ourselves” – to our backgrounds and

¹ Hal Brady, Dallas, Texas, 4 October 1992.

cultures and desires. No, we live to the Lord, and we submit all that we are to his judgment and guidance, not our own or anyone else's.

Finally, Paul asks, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?"

Here, Paul is saying we need to look at our motives when arguing with others. Is it only about making ourselves more comfortable? Do we feel the need to be right all the time? Are we trying to maintain power over others? Are we trying to make ourselves feel superior, or more accepted, or loved? Is it out of a sense of fear that we're pushing back, afraid we're going to lose control over something we need or something that makes us feel secure?

"... We will all stand before the judgment seat of God," says Paul. And until that time, the Lord is our only comfort, Christ alone is righteous, all power and glory belong to him – not us – those who love and serve the Lord have nothing to fear, and in Christ, we are all loved, equally, alongside one another.

So, the next time you find yourself arguing with someone, or being dug in and positional, or judging others based on what's right and wrong, ask yourself, "Why do I feel the need to judge this person, to argue about this? Is this issue really more important than the person standing before me?"

No, we are all children of God, and everyone deserves, from us, the same grace and mercy that we receive from the Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord God in heaven, today we gather as your people to worship you in spirit and truth. We celebrate your life in us and celebrate your body, the church. Help us to reflect your love for us with the love we have for each other.

It is with great joy that we come before you today, joined by your Spirit. Thank you for your love and mercy shown to us. Thank you that we can comfort another with the same love and mercy that has comforted us.

Send your spirit of comfort upon those who grieve the loss of loved ones. We pray your healing touch and spirit of health and wellbeing upon dealing with illness and disease. We pray, also, for the victims of the war between Israel and Hamas, and for an end to the hostilities there and across the globe, including in Ukraine and Russia.

Help us today to understand more fully how you have made us to live together in peace, serving you in our service to one another. Help us to understand your plan for the church that is your body, and to give you praise.

We pray all this in your powerful name, using the words that you taught us, praying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**