

**13 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19 – Year A – September 14, 2011 - Homily**  
**Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35**  
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When I was thinking about tonight's reading from Romans with Paul's references to the weak and the strong, I couldn't help remembering the game show called *The Weakest Link*. You might remember it, although even I was surprised that it was actually aired up to 2002. The catch phrase at the end of each round was, "You are the weakest link. Goodbye!" As I recall, the contestants were pretty ruthless in eliminating the competition to ensure that they had a shot at the highest dollar winnings.

Our reading from Romans has a new version of *The Weakest Link*. In this portion of Paul's letter, he describes two types of Christians, "the weak in faith" and the "strong in faith". Just to clarify, those who Paul calls strong in faith tended to be less rigid in rules and rituals associated with their practice of Christianity. Those who Paul calls weak in faith tended to be more rule bound, and particular about certain items of religious practice like not eating meat, abstaining from alcohol, or being diligent about observing particular days as holy days. Another important aspect of this discussion on doctrinal practices, which clearly were contentious enough to cause a disruption in community relationships, is that all of the practices that Paul is discussing here are what he understands as matters that really don't matter. It's about differences in style more than substance. Finally, of real importance here is that Paul is not saying anything goes. Only that we should understand that our diet choices, preferred style of worship, and days on our calendar do not form the basis of the Gospel message.

Paul opens with this comment, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." Paul's first admonishment to the community of faith is to welcome everyone. His theological premise is that we should share God's graciousness as openly, as faithfully, and as equally with one another, as God welcomes us all as heirs of His kingdom by faith in Christ Jesus. The real issue at stake here is honoring God's divine hospitality in our own lives of faith, without judgment, in the full knowledge that we are all ultimately accountable to God alone, and that we are all equal and equally valuable in God's sight. In fact, as we're about to see, Paul's message goes way beyond tolerance. It is love in action, because it extends into active and faithful welcoming as a way of being in community, one with another. His message completely undercuts all individualism and selfish ends. As Michael J. Gorman puts it, sacrificial or cruciform hospitality encourages diversity in matters that don't really matter; self-denial for the edification of others; and attentive discipleship, whereby our worship and praise of God, flows from our relationship and obedience to Christ Jesus.

Paul repeatedly points out that whatever we do; we are accountable to the same Lord. Whatever we do, we do in honor of the Lord. Interestingly enough, Paul's focus here is not accentuating what makes us different, but emphasizing the unity we share through our relationship with God in Christ Jesus, and therefore as members of Christ's Body. The responsibility of community is always a challenge. Put more than one person in a room and you'll have an equal number of opinions on almost every issue under the sun. Yet we have been called to live in community as the Body of Christ, and so we have to stop judging others. Judgmentalism is the quickest way to build walls, and let's be sure we understand what that means. We build walls in order to protect our opinions. And we almost certainly want to protect our opinions because we are in some way or many ways afraid. Judgmentalism is the fastest track to exclusivity and to creating

God in our own image. Why? Because Christ offers us expansive and abundant freedom in Him. He breaks down walls through radical hospitality and the gift of reconciliation. Because we cannot put God in a box. When we start believing that God agrees with everything *we* think is right, proper or the truth, that's a sure sign that we're a long way from God. It simply means that we have conveniently recreated God in our own image. Our joy and our substantial challenge in living as a community of faith, is in loving God, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Mutuality in love demands that we put the needs of our beloved brothers and sisters, before our own. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, in love anything we do must accommodate the needs of those who are weak in faith, in order to build up the Body of Christ, tear down the walls that can easily divide and disrupt relationships, and practice genuine hospitality in matters that really don't matter. For example, if the member of the parish I'm with believes strongly that in faith they should abstain from alcohol, then I too will abstain from alcohol. It is a simple way to extend hospitality.

Paul indicates that the key to right relationships is practicing God's gracious hospitality to all. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:22,24b-25, "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ... But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another." For you and I the issue is one of integrity in faith. Integrity of faith is how our beliefs guide our actions. If our beliefs are leading us to form an exclusive club or faction where everyone agrees with our opinions, we are not practicing Christianity. If our beliefs make us judgmental of others, then we are not being disciples of Jesus. If we exercise our power by being like the church policy and procedure police, then we're robbing the community of vitality, strength and creativity. The real gift of community is the opportunity to listen to one another, learn from each other, and grow together. There are times when each of those aspects of discipleship makes us uncomfortable, and challenges us to the core. However, God's love and hospitality require us to move beyond our comfort zones, open our hearts, and our minds. This is how the Holy Spirit can breeze through, renewing and transforming our minds, and restoring our joy and zeal for God in Christ Jesus. On *The Weakest Link*, the host declares, "You are the weakest link. Goodbye!" The Beatles once sang, "I don't know why you say goodbye, I say hello." Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Matthew 10:40).

Amen.