

We Survived
Bigger Than This
May 10, 2020

Clearly, we just disagree over how to go about re-opening our country.

Thanks for tuning in as we begin this new series, *We Survived* – now if we can just keep from killing each other.

I don't know about you, but I am just as concerned about *that* issue – in fact, I'm *more* concerned about it – than I have been about the virus itself.

Every medical expert in the field has said from the beginning *and is continuing to say* that most of us (not *all* but *most*) ...

Most of us will not be affected *physically* by the virus. We may “catch it” and, if we do, it's very

likely that we will be asymptomatic or have only very mild symptoms.

That's *not* to say we shouldn't be cautious and do the things that protect our health and, especially, the health of the most vulnerable among us.

It *is* to say that the greatest danger to most of us from this virus is not physical nor is it economic or financial.

The greatest danger is *what this virus is going to do to our relationships* with family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and others in our lives with whom “we just disagree.”

- Because what's already beginning to happen is destructive.
- What's already beginning to happen is contempt, hatefulness, condemnation, and

demonization of anyone who disagrees with our opinion on “the right thing to do.”

- What’s already beginning to happen – sadly, shockingly, unbelievably – is *literal killing*, as happened to the security guard in Michigan.

As I have been watching this tension increase in recent days, I keep thinking how ironic – actually, *how terrible* – it would be if we overcome the worst physical effects of this pandemic – and I mean both medical and economic ...

How terrible, how foolish, how reckless it would be if we overcome this thing physically, and wind up destroying *each other and our relationships* in the process.

Furthermore, while I care greatly about our relationships in general, as a pastor – as *your* pastor if NHCC is your church – what I care

about most is relationships ...

- Between people who are believers in and followers of Jesus
- Between people who are part of this congregation
- People who are in a small group together
- People on our church staff
- People who volunteer together in our ministries
- People who sit next to each other in this auditorium or walk by each other in the commons.

As a pastor – as *your* pastor if this is your church
– I care most about those relationships.

And I am concerned that we might reflect the attitude of contempt, hatefulness, condemnation, and demonization that's going on in the world at large.

And I am concerned about that because, right now, collectively as a church, we, too, are facing the issue of what to do next.

As most of you know, according to Mayor Lucas' recent 10-10-10 order, churches within the Kansas City, MO city limits will be able to open at 10% of capacity beginning next Friday, May 15th.

In our case, that means we'll be able to have up to 190 people in the building at a time beginning next Sunday, May 17th.

And because we're all coming from different places emotionally, physically, financially, spiritually, philosophically, and temperamentally – have I covered everything?

...

Because we're all coming from different places, *we're going to disagree* about what is appropriate.

- Some of us are going to be worried that, as a church, “we’re going too far too fast and unnecessarily putting people (and our community) in grave danger.”
- Some of us are going to be disappointed that “we’re being too cautious, because this whole thing has been so overblown – at least in our area.”
- Some of us are going to be concerned that “we’re abdicating before the governmental powers that want to gradually steal away our rights” – including our religious freedom.

Have I covered everyone yet?

I think that's pretty close to the entire spectrum of opinion.

What's interesting is that this spectrum is reflected not only within our congregation. It's reflected in *every* congregation.

And it's also reflected among church leaders from different churches within the same community.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a news report from Phoenix AZ where churches are allowed to re-open today.

Check this out.

(B) Reporter: "Even though churches like this one ..."

Reporter: "... in Phoenix, Jason Barry for Arizona's Family."

You can be sure that, within those congregations, there are more than a few people who *do not like* what the leadership has decided to do. And they are, at the very least, scratching their heads at the members who *do* like it.

So, the question I'm wrestling with – the question our pastors and staff has been wrestling with – is how do we keep a group of people *like us* with such diverse opinions *and – don't miss this – legitimate concerns* from killing each other and the church (metaphorically speaking) as we move into the immediate future?

Because I want better for us than that. I want better for you all. I want better for me. I want better for our community and the influence we have in it.

And that's why we're doing this series.

Now, obviously, from everything I just said, this series is going to be focused primarily on relationships between followers of Jesus and how those followers handle disagreements over what to do, collectively.

But I think much of what we're going to talk about can be applied to relationships in general even if you're not a Christian. And if that's you, I'm grateful that you're watching and listening in.

And I hope you *do* try to apply what we're going to talk about over the next four weeks because I think the "Way of Jesus" is far better than the way of the world and the way that comes natural to all of us.

So, let's get into it.

When in Rome

And let's begin by stating the question again.

How do you keep a group of Christ-followers with diverse opinions and legitimate concerns from (metaphorically) “killing” each other and the church?

Fortunately, we're not the first to raise this question.

It actually came up in the earliest days of Christianity which is why there is a long-established set of guidelines that we can follow; guidelines which are recorded in a letter that the Apostle Paul sent to a group of churches in the first-century city of Rome.

Now, if you know very much about the Bible and, in particular, the New Testament, you know that this letter (which we call “the Book of Romans”) is extremely dense in terms of the material that Paul covers.

It's by far his longest letter, weighing in at over

7,000 words, which is just under twice as long as one of my messages written out, and 35 times as long as the average letter of that day.ⁱ

And, in this epic tome, Paul covers so much ...

- Jewish history
- Christian theology
- And practical application ...

... that not only is it more than a *little* overwhelming to the casual reader, it's also easy to completely miss the reason *why* he goes into so much depth concerning ...

- Jewish history
- Christian theology
- And practical application.

And that reason is ...

Well, let me tell you a story.

In A.D. 49, about nine years before Paul wrote this letter, the Roman Emperor Claudius kicked out all the Jews who were living in Rome because of an ongoing conflict in the synagogues in that city.

Seutonius, an ancient Roman historian – and not a Christian – writing in about 120 A.D., wrote that ...

“Since the Jews were constantly rioting under the leadership of Chrestus [which is a transliteration of the word “Christ”], he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.”ⁱⁱ

... an event which, by the way, was *also* recorded in the New Testament book of Acts (which was written 60 years before Seutonius) ...

... which refers to ...

... a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come

*from Italy with his wife Priscilla,
because Claudius had
commanded all the Jews to leave
Rome. Acts 18:1-2
(NIV)*

My point in showing you that is to affirm, once again, that the documents we have in the New Testament are not allegorical or made up. They are trustworthy accounts of real historical events in the life of Jesus and of those who were His very first followers.

In any case, what was happening is that some of the Jewish men and women living in Rome had become believers in Jesus. But, because they were still Jewish in heritage and in custom, they continued to show up for worship in the synagogues scattered across the city ...

... which, as you might expect, caused a problem for the other Jewish men and women who did *not* believe Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

Apparently, the conflict between the two groups grew to be so frequent and severe (remember, Suetonius characterized it as “rioting”) that Claudius had had enough, and he kicked them *all* out – both the non-Jesus-believing Jews and the Jesus-believing Jews (like Aquila and Priscilla that Luke tells us about in Acts) ... and closed the synagogues.

This meant that the only believers-in-Jesus remaining in Rome at that time were men and women who were *not* Jewish, otherwise known as Gentiles. These are people (like many of us) who had never been Jewish but heard about Jesus and had come to believe in Him.

Now, I know that’s a little confusing, but you need to be clear on it to understand where we’re going with this.

So, here’s a little diagram I made up to help visualize it.

- In Rome, AD 48 there were three groups: Gentile believers-in-Jesus as well as Jewish believers-in-Jesus plus Jewish non-believers. Those last two groups regularly met together in synagogues.
- But in AD 49 following Claudius' order, there were only Gentile believers-in-Jesus left in Rome because the Jewish believers-in-Jesus and the Jewish non-believers were gone, leaving no one to meet in the synagogues.

And it stays this way until Claudius dies in AD 54, after which some of the Jewish people who were kicked out of Rome begin to come back, including Aquila and Priscilla who Paul actually mentions in his letter to the Romans.

But hold that thought for just a minute because what's really important to understand is that ...

For six-plus years (from 49 to at least 55), there

is no Jewish influence on Christianity in Rome.

All the Jewish Christians are gone and only the Gentile Christians remain. And all new converts to Christianity – and there are many – are also Gentiles.

Furthermore, because all of the synagogues were closed, Christian worship has been happening in *homes ... of Gentiles*.

So, when Paul's letter arrives in 57 – after a sizeable contingent of Jewish men and women have returned to Rome ...

The situation looks like this ...

- There are now Gentile believers + Jewish believers-in-Jesus meeting together in homes ... while Jewish non-believers-in-Jesus have begun to meet separately in the synagogues.

At this point, the two Jewish groups have realized it's best to part company lest Nero decide to kick them out like Claudius did.

And that little equation of "Gentile believers + Jewish believers" (meeting in Gentile homes all over the city of Rome) is why Paul has to write his letter.

The problem is that these people need to come together *physically* on a regular basis for worship (kind of like we do).

They need to occupy the same space at the same time (like we do) because Jesus came to build an *ecclesia* – a community, a gathering – not to create a "let's all have a personal relationship with God" society (though that certainly is included in being part of an *ecclesia*).

Of course, the question is *why is that a problem?*

For one thing, the Jewish people were the original Christians. They brought faith-in-Jesus

to Rome where the Gentiles then were added into the ecclesia – the church – as they believed.

But now, the Gentile Christians were running the show, so to speak.

And, so, an attitude developed among the Jewish Christians of “hey, we were here first, and we don’t like how you guys have changed things. We want it to go back to how it was because, after all, this whole salvation thing is of us. We’re the people through whom God chose to send the Messiah.”

“So, you guys better get in line and do it our way.”

And, in response, the Gentiles attitude becomes, “well, that may be true, but you guys are a bunch of legalists. You’re so tied up in your heritage and in keeping the Law of Moses that you have not fully understood the freedom that is in Christ ... freedom that we’ve been enjoying for

six-plus years while you've been gone!"

"And we don't want to go back. So, you guys better get in line and do it our way" ...

... which is the second reason why meeting together is a problem: Gentile Christians believe they don't need to follow certain Jewish customs while the Jewish Christians do.

And what happens is that Paul hears about this conflict that exists at some level in all of the house churches all over the city of Rome, most likely from Aquila and Priscilla.

So, he writes this massive letter to be read to all of those believers meeting in all of those homes – a letter which deals with ...

- Jewish heritage and its purpose and its value

- Christian theology and the unique place of grace and freedom in it
- And how all of that applies to both groups in everyday life.

And what's fascinating is how he constantly goes back and forth addressing both groups in the letter – and right from the very beginning.

- In chapter 1, Paul smacks down the Gentile Christians, reminding them that they are guilty sinners through and through because even though they didn't have the Law of Moses, they willfully chose to violate the law of nature and the law of their own conscience.
- And in chapter 2, he smacks down the Jewish Christians, reminding them that they are no better than the Gentiles because they commit the same sins even

with the Law of Moses.

It's genius and I love it because Paul is an "equal opportunity offender." Everyone is mad at him by the time he is done, which makes him a man after my own heart. 😊

But the point of the whole thing – of all the history and all the theology and all the application that gets so deep that, at times, we get lost in the weeds ...

The point of everything Paul writes is found near the end of the letter.

Therefore, accept each other ...

Quit the one-upmanship; quit the bickering; quit the "gotchas" ...

Accept each other ...

... just as Christ has accepted you

...

... you who were, quite frankly, not all that acceptable as I explained at the beginning of this letter.

But Jesus accepted you anyway. So, do the same for each other.

Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you ...

*... so that God will be given glory.
Romans 15:7 (NLT)*

And that's the whole point of the whole letter.

Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you, so that God will be given glory.

And, then, just for completeness, Paul does something really cool.

In the beginning of the letter, whereas he smacked down each group as being part of the

reason the whole world is messed up by sin.

Now, at the end, he's going to show how each group is part of God's plan to redeem the world.

Remember, Paul continues ...

*... that Christ came as a servant
to the Jews to show that God is
true to the promises he made to
their ancestors. Romans
15:8 (NLT)*

In other words, God used you Jewish men and women – God sent Jesus *through* you guys – to show that He keeps His word and, therefore, can be trusted.

And, Paul adds ...

*He also came so that the Gentiles
might give glory to God for his
mercies to them.
Romans 15:9 (NLT)*

In other words, God used you pagan men and women – God sent Jesus *to* you guys – to show that he welcomes *everyone*, even those who religious people consider being “on the outside.”

So what Paul is saying here is “all of you – regardless of which group you’re in – are the culmination of what God has been planning to do all along in Jesus. Both Jews and Gentiles matter in His plan. You’re equally valuable to God in spite of who was first and in spite of your cultural differences.”

Guidelines for Peace

Now at this point, I’m sure you’re thinking, “wow, Rick, cool story, thanks for explaining all of this to us. But what’s your point? How does it apply to our current situation?”

I’m glad you asked.

The reason why all of this matters ... the reason I've told you this is that, in order to make sense of what we're going to focus on in the rest of this message and in the three messages to follow, we have to understand the dynamic that existed between the two groups and what Paul was trying to accomplish.

And now that we do, let's back up just a few paragraphs and look at those long-established guidelines designed to keep a group of Christ-followers with diverse opinions and legitimate concerns from (metaphorically) killing each other and the church.

This is from verse 1 of chapter 14. Paul writes ...

Accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. Romans 14:1 (NASB)

Now, remember there are two groups in all of

these house churches – Jewish believers and Gentile believers – and Paul is talking to both groups.

One of those groups, according to this statement, apparently has faith that is “weak” in comparison to that of the *other* group.

But honestly, I don’t think that’s *Paul’s* assessment. I think Paul’s words here are meant as *sarcasm*.

Unfortunately, there’s no way to know because, in the original Greek language, there are no punctuation marks; there are no quote marks.

But Paul has been just snarky enough throughout this letter to both groups that I think he’s sarcastically quoting the way the “strong faith” group talks about the other group.

“We’re strong. You’re weak. Nana nana boo boo.”

From everything else Paul has written, I think that's what's been going on.

So which group is which?

Well, the next sentence gives the answer.

One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

Romans 14:2 (NASB)

And now we know.

The Gentile Christians were the ones who had never been under the Law of Moses with all of its dietary restrictions. And they understood that their salvation was not dependent on avoiding meat; that it was completely dependent on their trust in Jesus and what He had done for them.

Now, the Jewish Christians understood that, too.

They weren't dumb.

But because they had grown up with those restrictions, it was hard for them to eat foods – meat, in particular – that had been offered to an idol or meat that wasn't kosher. They could do it, but they never felt really good about it.

Of course, a good question at this point is ... why is it even an issue what everyone is eating?

It's because Christian worship at that time *included a meal*.

And because Christian worship was happening in homes belonging to who? *Gentiles* ... guess what was always on the menu?

Meat, which had most likely *not* been prepared according to Mosaic Law.

And that caused the Jewish Christians a lot of stress. "I'm not sure we should do that" they

would say ...

... to which the Gentile Christians would respond, “Oh, come on! Get over it you bunch of spiritual weaklings.”

... to which the Jewish Christians would roll their eyes and respond, “You ungrateful heathens have no respect for tradition. Remember, *we* were here first. You guys wouldn’t even be here without us.”

And on and on it went ... which is why, in the next sentence, Paul tells both sides – and *us* and whatever side we’re on in this coronavirus thing – what it will take to keep from killing each other and the church.

He writes:

The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does

not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Romans 14:3 (NASB)

This is the key. Do not regard with contempt and do not judge.

In the weeks to come, we're going to talk more about this and, specifically, how it applies to this coronavirus situation.

But, for today, where I want to land is on what Paul says to the "strong faith" group – the Gentiles – because this is why this discussion matters in the first place (and it also forms the basis of our next step as a church).

He writes:

*Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died.
Romans 14:15b (NLT)*

And, again, remember that Paul is talking about

what's happening in worship services when both groups are together. He's not talking about what people do for lunch or dinner with their family at home or at a restaurant.

“When you are together as a church,” he is saying, “you who are strong must not let your right to freedom in what you eat – which is a good thing – drive away your brothers and sisters who just don't see it the way you do or, if they do see it your way, just can't get there yet.”

“That 'weak' brother or sister matters to God far more than your right to be right.”

For ...

The Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Romans 14:17 (NLT)

In other words, what we're doing – what *God* is

doing in us and through us: goodness, peace and joy – is way bigger than what we eat or don't eat when we gather together.

That issue is going to fade away and no one will even remember it – and no one does, which is why I had to spend 15 minutes explaining it.

And the same is going to be true about the coronavirus. This too shall pass. It will one day become a distant memory ...

... which is why, as a congregation, we are not going to let our opinions about this pandemic and what is being done or not done drive a wedge between us and someone for whom Jesus gave His life.

Our Next Steps

And it's why, as a congregation, we are going to lean towards those whose faith is “weak” in this

matter.

Or, as Paul puts it:

We who are “strong” ought to bear with the “failings” of the “weak” and not just please ourselves. Romans 15:1 (NET)

As we begin to gather together for worship – and we *are* going to begin gathering together for worship ...

- Because, as I said at the beginning of this message, under the 10-10-10 guidelines, we are able as of next Sunday to have up to 190 people in our building.
- And because, gathering is by definition what an “ecclesia” (or “church”) is. There’s no such thing as a church that doesn’t gather.

As we begin to gather again next Sunday, we who are “strong” ... meaning:

- We who believe it is safe to go out without wearing a mask
- We who believe the whole thing is overblown
- We who believe that we have the right to show up for worship even if our lives are in danger (and we do).

We who are “strong” are going to bear with the “failings” of the “weak” and not just please ourselves when we have church.

What that means is that we’re going to observe all of the safety guidelines that we’ve been asked to observe ... with a good attitude ... even if we think they’re dumb.

We’re going to try and make those who don’t think it’s overblown ... who do think a mask is

necessary ... comfortable and safe being around us. We're going to please *them* not ourselves ...

... which, if you think about it, is not that much to ask for one hour considering that Jesus died for our sake.

Now, you don't have to do this anywhere else but if you come to church beginning next Sunday, you will.

Because, remember, that's what this whole principle is about: how we keep a group of Christ-followers (like us) with diverse opinions and legitimate concerns (like us) from "killing" each other and this church.

So, here's how it's going to work.

Even though we're not ready to offer our full ministry program (Adventureland, Student Ministry, etc) and it might be a while ...

We are ready to offer 125 NHCCers the opportunity to be part of a "live studio audience" for 9:30 services beginning next Sunday, May 17th.

We're starting with 125 people because that will allow us to easily maintain social distancing in this room. If it goes well, we might increase the number. But this is where we're starting.

Now, if you're in a high-risk group or you don't feel good about this, don't feel any pressure to come. Those who *do* come will not regard you with contempt (or I'll pull a "Paul" and kick their spiritual butts – in Christian love of course).

But, in return, *you* must not judge those who *do* show up because we will be following the guidelines laid out by our health department.

In fact, just so you'll know, I've had a very helpful and informative email conversation with our Deputy Health Director, Frank Thompson, about why they're asking us to

follow these guidelines. Our council representatives as well as Mayor Lucas have been on the “copy to” list as well.

I'll share that with you next week.

But, for now ...

- If it would benefit your emotional and mental health ...
- AND you are NOT experiencing any symptoms of COVID19 (tiredness, cough, fever, aches) ...
- AND if you are willing to abide by the guidelines we're setting ...

We'd love to have you join us.

What are those guidelines, you ask?

Before I tell you, let me say that some of you are not going to like them.

- But remember it's not about pleasing ourselves but about making our "weaker" brothers and sisters feel safe.
- And remember that this, too, shall pass. It's not going to be like this forever.
- And remember that what we're doing here is bigger than this situation and this time.

So, here are the guidelines.

Here is what you must agree to if you want to attend.

- Register in advance on the link under the "sign me up" tab on our website. No walk-ins allowed.
- Sit in assigned seating. This allows us to

space individuals and groups at a six-foot distance.

- Wear a mask at all times. We will supply masks for those who do not have one.
- Follow the directions of staff and volunteers when entering and exiting the auditorium as well as moving through the commons.
- Maintain a six-foot distance from anyone not in your family.
- Sanitize hands upon entering the building.

Them's the rules, kids, for at least a while.

And, again, you don't have to come if you don't want to agree to these rules. We'll still love you and you can still watch via livestream.

Now, if you do choose to come, here are some other things you should know:

- Staff and volunteers will hold doors to minimize contact with hard surfaces.
- Hand sanitizer will be available throughout the commons.
- Bathrooms will be cleaned by staff and volunteers after each use.
- Childcare will not be provided but children are welcome. Note, however, that the service will not be “family-friendly” (i.e. we’re not reducing or changing content).
- Children and students who attend must remain with parents at all times.
- If children become unsettled, parents must move to the commons area.

- The Coffee Corner will be closed but you are welcome to bring your own.
- We will not be reporting service attendance to the city as this is not required under the current orders. However, if you become sick after attending a service, please let us know so we can inform others who were seated near you.
- You will receive an email in the week before the service with all of this information as well as your seat assignments (plus all of this is spelled out on the registration form).

Obviously, these guidelines are much more stringent than we're used to, but this is our reality for now. We're thankful that we're able to offer this opportunity and we hope and pray

that this will be an encouraging experience for everyone.

Ok, let's pray.

1. Next week – Fear Factor: Why the worst-case scenario might not be what we think it is.

2. Offering

ⁱ <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/what-you-might-not-know-about-pauls-letters>

ⁱⁱ Suetonius, Lives of the Twelve Caesars, (Claudius 25.4)

Resources used for the historical context include:

- [Romans: A House Church Manifesto?](#), by Herbert Drake
- [Historical Context and Overview of St. Paul's Letter to Romans](#), Dr. Andrew Swafford
- [Something About the Book of Romans that will Help You Really "Get" It](#), Kenneth Berding — August 29, 2012