

So many ways to look at this passage. These first words, “those who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak.” Maybe it’s just as simple as that.

Those of us who are healthy should care for the unhealthy; those of us with a little money should help those with none; those of us with strong minds and hearts should help those who are forgetful, and broken and lonely; those of us who have come to know the love of God should help those who have merely memorized God’s commandments.

Beginning in chapter 12, Paul has been outlining Christian ethics; how we should get along, and the manner in which we should give comfort and help to one another, and give glory to God in the doing. Specifically in chapter 14, with this contrast between strong and weak, he has written about what is permissible to eat: clean or unclean food. In Paul’s terminology, the “strong” feel they can eat anything, but the “weak” think it is sin to eat unclean food. But here in chapter 15, Paul has expanded the meanings of strong and weak. Now, it is the strong who “bear with the weaknesses of those who have no strength,” which is a more literal translation of verse 1. So, we need to understand these “weaknesses.” They are more than old-fashioned ideas about food; they are also ill-health, poverty,

loneliness and hurt and depression; these weaknesses are also close-mindedness and an excluding kind of mentality, a sense that faith founded is upon commandments and order and fear rather than gratitude for the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

I read this passage of scripture and wonder, strong or weak, which am I? We get this idea that the strong ones are some kind of super-Christians, like body-builders with angel's wings, who just glide right over temptations, doubt-free, always sure of the direction God is leading. And there may be people like that, but that doesn't necessarily mean strength, maybe just self-assurance; it may mean indifference, it may mean a skewed understanding of belief; and if they think of themselves in this manner, they could be the weak ones rather than the strong. The strong are not those with extra abilities, rather they are the ones who get their strength from the Holy Spirit. The word "strong" in verse 1 comes from the same root word in verse 13, which describes the power of the Holy Spirit; our words dynamite and dynamic come from this same Greek word. So, "strong" really is dependence upon and connection to God's Spirit, instead of talent or intellect or personal ability. Our example is Jesus Christ, noted in verses 3 and 7. Jesus is the strong one, and yet he was the servant of all.

I can remember teachers and preachers, and friends in college, all kinds of people at various times, saying that Jesus must have had this strong sense of self, he knew who he was; that he must have been the very best communicator ever, and that he had this uncanny insight to know the right word to speak to people; or when he was doing carpentry back in Nazareth, he was the best carpenter he could be. Maybe he wasn't any of that. Maybe he was a crummy carpenter, because his mind was always somewhere else. It looks to me like the only thing we need to know about Jesus is that he understood the meaning of God's love to be that *one person should be the servant of the other because of God's love*. This strong/weak thing is turned upside down by Jesus. It looks like Paul got it, too. Verse 1 could actually be a challenge to anyone who perceives himself or herself to be strong. "Bear with their weaknesses" possibly means "you who are strong must *put up with* all those people who think they are strong." A difficult task indeed, dealing with all those egos and ignorance. We may think we are, or want to be, strong but the job description is far from easy.

I look at this passage, and read about "welcoming" or "receiving" one another, verse 7, which seems to mean, not excluding other people. This church in Rome was most likely made up of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and possibly some

high-born folks, probably different nationalities- the slaves would have come from all over the world, but Paul want them all to be equal, in fact, to be servants to one another, just as Jesus was a servant. There had to have been a lot of welcoming, and not much judgment.

And so, the very first thing we must understand, is that this isn't a contest between "this" group and "that" group, or liberal or conservative, or whatever terms one might want to use. It is rarely about being right or wrong, but it is the attitude of love that one group should have for the other group. And it must never be about power. The only competition in the community of the followers of Jesus is to "outdo one another in showing honor," as Paul has written back in chapter 12.

But I can't tell you how many churches I know about, some rather intimately, where this or that group is so sure of its own rightness, and recognizes the sinfulness of the other group, and demands agreement to its own interpretations, and so, kidnaps the church of our Lord for ransom; which then must be paid by the hurt and rejection of those they do not approve of. "Strong and weak" among Christ's disciples must never be about getting the upper hand, or making sure my conception of pure doctrine is the accepted one, but that the love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ is shared and his cross proclaimed. What else can

welcoming one another, in verse 7, mean? Christ has welcomed you! Paul wrote. *Christ* has welcomed you! How could there be *anybody* we would refuse to welcome!

The meaning of this is obvious if we look at the following verses, that we are to welcome those different from us, and even those opposed to our viewpoints. Paul writes that Jesus has become servant to the Jews so that we can see God's truthfulness and the fulfillment of God's promises, and so that God may be glorified by the Gentiles. He then goes on in verses 9-12 to quote the great Old Testament figures Moses, King David, the prophet Isaiah, to show that God calls the Gentiles, those strangers, those so unlike the chosen people; demonstrating that the purposes and mercies of God include even our enemies. And we are called to be strong enough- or weak enough- to serve them. For Jesus came in his strength- or weakness- not to please himself, verse 3, but to bear the hatred and rejection of those who despised God; and so God's enemies, those who have done wrong and thought wrongly, may become God's friends.

I might have come on a little "strong." I may be preaching more to my own personal background than to you this morning. But too often it seems we have introduced into the church, even in the best churches, the antagonistic, competitive

attitudes of society, of business, of nationalism. And we think that if we heed certain commandments, well, that is proof we are right, and others are wrong because they don't. We think we must stay strong, keep focused on the rules, never give in to the needs of those "wrong" people- that puts us to close to sin- never get our hands dirty or put ourselves in the path of temptation. And yet. Jesus walked among the outcasts, the sinners, the ill and the unacceptable; ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. Would he have been willing to share a meal with us? And would we have been willing to sit at table with him?

So, I read these verses and wonder, "what am I to preach to these white bread church folks here in Belton, and to people who do obviously care for one another?" Does this exhortation to "welcome one another" apply to us at First Christian?

Oh, yes, and the place perhaps for us to start may be to realize that the final words of Romans, these ethical instructions, are 1) a reminder to us of what the Lord has accomplished in calling the Gentiles (calling us!) to obedience. In this second half of Romans 15, Paul justifies his ministry by recounting what Christ has done through him "by word and deed, by the *strength* of signs and wonders, and by

the *strength* of the Holy Spirit,” verses 18 and 19. There is that word “dynamite,” “dynamism” again.

And 2) this ethical teaching demands that we stop thinking of ourselves as the culmination of Christ’s labor, but should remember those other groups out there, the lost, the despised, the hungry, the put down; and starving and battered brown and black people; illegal immigrants, and all different nationalities and colors and political views; remember these as the ones Jesus Christ came to save, and whom God calls; and calls to us: to welcome them and to serve.

Henri Nouwen has written these words in a short devotion entitled “God and Neighbor.”

Conversion to God means a simultaneous conversion to the other persons who live with you on this earth. The farmer, the worker, the student, the prisoner, the sick, black people and white people, the weak, the strong, the oppressed and the oppressor, the patient and the one who heals, the tortured and the torturer, the boss and the flunky...they are also called to make themselves heard and to give God a chance to be the God of all. Thus compassion removes all pretensions and false modesty. It invites you to understand everything, to see yourself in the light of God and joyfully to tell everyone you meet that there is no reason to fear.