**Behind the Text**

Our passage today from Romans led me to title this message The Testimony of Conscience. I’d like to set up this discussion of Paul with a bit of context, because I’ve never spoken on Paul since I’ve been with you.

We have been enjoying the foundation stories of the OT for some months now, interspersed with the parables, teaching and deeds of Jesus in Matthew. Both genres are really engaging by their nature. Jesus’ whole method in what he did and said was to stimulate our divine imagination, to stir reflection, to get us to ponder on the meaning of life.

When we come to the literature of Paul, we are quite aware that we are in an entirely different genre. It is deeply theological. There are complex, theoretical arguments in Romans and even mystical themes sometimes. If you have found Romans to be a difficult book to read you aren’t alone.

It is what Bible nerds call “occasional literature,” that is, it is his correspondence *occasioned* by his travels to various existing Christian communities in the northern Mediterranean basin, and as he established new Christian communities, both adjacent to the synagogue and even among Gentiles entirely outside of the Jewish population.

It is a signature of this genre that it has a significant emphasis on exhortation to moral conduct, if you notice probably at least a third or even half of everything Paul writes is specifically about ethics and conduct, i.e. paraenesis. Moral exhortation. So that is what this passage is about really.

Now often both Jews and Gentiles were present in these far-flung communities. Imagine that. His missionary ministry was an immensely difficult undertaking, not just geographically, but politically, and in a highly complex thought world at the intersection of the Jewish and Gentile religion. Wow.

We also know that Jesus and the first followers had the OT in their possession, at least in copies in the synagogues. An entire copy of Isaiah was unearthed at Qumran from exactly this period. And you know, it turned out that when we compared it to our modern recensions, we found that our modern Bibles preserved the text with almost perfect accuracy.

But in Paul’s day the gospels had not yet been written. He never quotes them because they didn’t exist yet. In fact, if he knows the stories of Jesus’ life he never talks about them.

So Paul pioneers the theology of the nascent church in this in-between-time. It was what he called …the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages (Ro 16:25).

When we read Paul we have to understand the almost unbelievable courage with which he undertook to make sense of the appearance Jesus made to him on the road to Damascus one day, and the gospel of the Messiah, a complete revolution in the way he saw his Jewishness, he being a Pharisee; and to bring to light what amounts to a brand new world of thought - neither entirely Jewish or Gentile. It was because he had the pounding in his heart of the presence of Jesus.

Even if you aren’t in the church, I think any curious person would benefit by the study of his life, and the mammoth influence he holds over 2000 years of the Christian church. He calls himself the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Remember Paul had never been to Rome, so he didn’t know them or the particulars of their conflicts, but he had been to Corinth and he knew that food offered to idols had been a real stumbling block for both Gentiles and Jews who had come to Christ; compare 1 Cor 8:9-13 and 10:23-11:1.

**In the Text**

This morning we have a really good example one of the deep conflicts that Paul had to attempt to resolve as he travelled about in his ministry. There were at least two main problems he dealt with throughout his ministry. He had the problem of circumcision and he had the problems related to the consumption of food. In our text today he tackles the food issue.

Now he thought that the gospel made all food clean; which was quite something for a Pharisee to say. The rest of chapter 14 tell us that Paul thought one can even eat food which was offered in a pagan temple and sold in the market with a clear conscience - if you believe you are redeemed by the resurrection of Jesus. I am persuaded that in the Lord Jesus nothing is unclean… (vs 14).

If your conscience was clear on it. There is one crucial caveat. If what you are doing makes it difficult for another believer (makes them stumble…vs 13) you must not do it. You must pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding… (vs 19).

Here Paul discusses the “strong” and the “weak” with respect to what can be eaten without transgressing one’s faith. So, let’s say you are a Gentile who is new to faith in Christ, who has been eating food offered in temples all his life and now, feels a real constraint in eating what was offered to an idol, as an offence to his faith in Jesus; that is “weakness.” Or certainly, Jews whose upbringing had a great deal to do with the ritual purity of food, would recoil in horror at eating meat which came from a market where temple animals were butchered and sold for a profit, again, “weakness.” If you are free in your conscience from such ideas, you are “strong.”

The point it, this issue touches the deepest sensibilities of these mixed communities of Gentile and Jewish Christians.

And you are going to put these two camps in one community? Oy vey! I think I would have said forget about it. You go into your bubble and I’ll go into mine and we’ll just agree to judge each other! There were Jewish only Christian communities where it was held that a person could not be a member without circumcision.

The only modern analogy that is so visceral is the polarization of political discourse today.’ How can you believe that?!... Well, how can you believe THAT?!’ It almost seems like an unbridgeable chasm.

**From the Text**

There are three valuable things to observe.

Human conscience plays a very important role in Paul’s thoughts about sin and salvation. The Greek word is suneidēsis, and it means “moral conscience,” not, for example, consciousness of God, or the work of the Spirit. It is the innate impress of the image of God in every person, Christian or non-Christian. It’s how we just know what is right and wrong, because God has set a moral conscience in every human being. It’s the angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other. It is why, normally, we don’t need to be told what is right and what is wrong – at least with reference to our own conscience. Calvin called it the evidence of the “immortality of the soul.”

This plays such a prominent role in Paul’ thinking, that the person who has never heard the Law, or by extension, has never had a reasonable opportunity to respond to the Gospel will be judged before God on the basis of his or her obedience to their moral conscience (Ro 2:15-16). This is the argument of Romans chapters 1 and 2. That is a very high view of the human soul and the imprint of image of God present in it. In ages past the theological quarrel what to what extent that image of God survived the fall. Calvin thought it was so lost in the fall as to have been eradicated. This issue is why I’m a Wesleyan and not in the reform theology camp. I think it is still strong in all of us in spite of the fall. As I read Romans Paul believed the conscience had saving power in the face of the ignorance of the law.

You find in his writings Paul is always talking about his own good conscience in his ministry.

Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity... (II Cor 1:12; see also Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Tim 1:18)

We can talk about our spiritual journey, but does the testimony of our conscience bear out our integrity and honesty. Paul was always eager to impress on his readers that his conscience was clear. He had no untoward motives.

And Paul warns about the corruption of the conscience, which is what happens when we habitually ignore and contradict our conscience, i.e. when we habitually do what we know is wrong.

… By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith… (1 Tim 1:19; see also Rom chapter 2)

So on this food dispute, Paul makes the conscience of the individual the arbiter of conduct (see vss 3-4 and 10-12)

And it also has to be observed that Paul says: ***Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.***

So here we have it. It’s in the Bible. We are not to make fun of vegetarians.

The second point is that judging others is reserved solely to God.

***Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*** (Ro 14:4)

After Jacob’s death Joseph’s brothers are afraid he will exact revenge on them for their mistreatment of him. When they bow down before him and beg forgiveness he says:

 “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? (Gen 50:19)

It is nice to be able to say something unequivocal about ethics. Do not judge lest ye be judged.

Lastly, we can take this from our passage today. What is most remarkable, almost unbelievable to me, is how tolerant of our even deepest differences Paul bids us be. Hear now the paraenesis, the moral exhortation, our subjunctive for the day. The conception of the community of faith here is so governed by the notion of our mutual redemption in Christ, that it’s members ought to be able to tolerate even the most profound differences and trust the judging to God.