

This week's *Emphasis* magazine has a couple of interesting stories in relation to today's biblical texts, which I want to share with you. One story says: The Greek-speaking church fathers had a very useful word they used in situations of church conflict.

The word is *adiaphora*. *Diaphora* means "different." Adding the prefix *a* to the front makes it negative—so *adiaphora* means literally, "no difference," or "it makes no difference."

What *adiaphora* means, in practical usage, is "something that's non-essential," "something you can do well perfectly well without," "something that does not matter all that much." Pipe organ or electric guitar in worship? *Adiaphora*. Tie-and-jacket or sport-shirt on communion servers? *Adiaphora*. American flag in the sanctuary or just in the fellowship hall? *Adiaphora*.

It is not that any of these are not important. It's just that they make no difference in determining whether or not this is a true church of Jesus Christ whom we learn from the Bible.

A healthy sense of what's *adiaphora* and what is not is a very useful tool for decision-making in the body of Christ. We human beings have personal preferences; everyone likes to try what they like; everyone has his or her own way of doing things; but when it comes to how we treat each other in a Christian community, welcoming and loving each other is more important than any other issue.

I think that's what the Romans' text talks about today. "Welcome those who are weak in faith," it says. "Some believe in eating anything, while others believe that Christians should eat only certain things." "Some believe that certain days of the year are more important than others, while others think all days are the same."

But St. Paul says, please do not judge people by how they practice their faith. If they are doing what they are doing to honor God, please respect. If they are not doing what you think they should be doing and that is because of their faith, honor their position too. Do not think the

way we worship God should only be a certain way; do not say the way we pray to God should be only this way. Do not pass judgment on others.

It is not going to be long before you and I stand before God. Let God be the judge. In the mean time, you and I have things to do; welcome one another.

Respect one another. Give people room. Invite everyone. Work together for the world. Do not waste your time. Do not waste your life. Life is short. I think this is what I hear from the text today.

Life is not about who is right or who is wrong on the issues; it is about how you live. God is watching us; God hears what we say and God sees what we do; He is the judge and our knees shall bow to Him soon; we are all accountable to God.

Life is not about how I am compared to someone next to you. It is about how we are faithful to God. It is about how we do in the sight of God. And Jesus says the greatest commandment is love God with all our hearts and minds and strength and then loves our neighbors as ourselves.

The Old Testament text shows us the high moment of the marvelous story of Exodus. It is about the scene where the Egyptians were going after the Israelites in the Red Sea and the waters divided making dry land so that the Israelites walked ok while the Egyptians got thrown into the sea and died.

One way of looking at this story is to try to see a picture of two groups; one, evil and the other, good; Pharaoh and his army are evil and the Israelites are good; there is darkness and light. Verse 20 says: "And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; and there was a clear line between the two groups so that one could not come near the other all night long.

There was another story by a Jewish Rabbi (Yochanan bar Nafcha)

that I found interesting from the current issue of *Emphasis*. The story says,

When the Red Sea returned and covered the chariots of Egyptian soldiers, the heavenly angels held a victory party. The Rabbi said that, while the angels were wild with jubilation, God told them to be quiet saying, "My creatures are perishing, and you are singing praises?"

I think this is quite an amazing story.

Even though the way the biblical narratives describe the event is quite different, I am totally impressed by the Rabbi's commentary.

God is not just the God of Israelites. God is the God of all, Jews and Gentiles, slaves or free. God sometimes punishes people; that does not mean He does not love them.

We sometimes demonize people of different faith, different ideologies, and different way of life. But God's grace reaches beyond the walls we set up between us. Sometimes we misunderstand that the sun is on our side only; how arrogant we are!

Because of what happened in the Red Sea, the text says, the Israelites feared God; they believed in the Lord. But we know what happened later; God also punished them when they turned away from Him.

Faith is not about who is good or who is evil; it is not about who is right or who is wrong; the biblical faith is whether we serve the Lord or not; it is about fearing and serving God; it is about whether we will be accountable to God.

I really like Paul's statement. "We do not live to ourselves," he says. "And we do not die to ourselves." Life is not about us; it is about God. If we die, we die. If we live, we live. No matter what happens today, I need to believe in God. I need to please Him. I need to do whatever God is pleased with. That is what life is about. And I believe that is where our hope lies and that is where our promise is.

Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; "Live or Die"; 9/14/08; Albany UMC

Personally, I want to do everything I can. Live or die.

I love God. Live or die.

I love Jesus. Live or die.

I love his church. Live or die.

I love what the church is called to do. That is welcoming God's people to his love. Live or die.

That is loving and serving God's people no matter who they are. Live or die.

With God's love and mercy, may those be also what you want to do.

Amen.