

HOLDING BACK

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

September 13, 2026

Pentecost 16

Exodus 14:21-22

Then Moses stretched his hand over the sea, and [Adonai] swept the sea with a strong east wind throughout the night and so turned it into dry land. When the water was thus divided, the Israelites marched into the midst of the sea on dry land, with the water walled up on their right and on their left.

Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those whose faith is weak, and don't argue with them. The opinions of people range from those who believe they may eat any sort of meat, to those whose faith is so weak they eat only vegetables. Those who eat everything must not despise those who abstain. The ones who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them. Who are you to judge someone else's worker? It's for the employer to decide if the worker has succeeded or failed—and the worker will succeed, for our God has the power to make it so. One person considers one day more sacred than another, another considers all faith equally sacred — and both are equally certain of their own opinions. The person who observes special days does it for our God. Whoever eats meat does it for our God and gives thanks to God. Whoever abstains does it for our God and gives thanks to God. We don't live for ourselves, nor do we die for ourselves. While we live, we live for Christ Jesus, and when we die, we die for Christ Jesus. Both in life and in death we belong to Christ. That's why Christ died and came to life again - in order to reign supreme over both the living and the dead. But you, how can you sit in judgment of your sisters or brothers? Or you, how can you look down on your sisters and brothers? We will all have to appear before the judgment seat of God. Scripture says, “As surely as I live”—it is our God who speaks— “every knee will bend before me, and every tongue will give praise to God.” We will all have to give an account of ourselves before God.



As the Israelites, led by Moses, approached the watery eastern border of the nation of Egypt, they must have realized that they had not yet left slavery behind them. I like to think that they could see the dust clouds being stirred up by those who were tasked with responding to Pharaoh's change of heart and a desire to bring Moses and the others back. At the same time, they would look forward and see this deep and wide and impassible wall of water ahead of them. The sea was a new danger to be avoided just as much as those chariots coming from behind were to be avoided. And so obviously the only option they would have had in that moment would have been to move up or down the coast, try to stay ahead of the chasing chariots for long enough to be able to find some place where the water was shallow enough that they might be able to attempt a crossing. And then Moses stretched out his hands... and winds blew and waters moved... and those waters of danger were held back. And in that holding back, a path through the water opened up.

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Recently I attended a seminar where the lunch was catered by a local vegetarian restaurant. There was no need for special meals for certain people. We could all eat what was on the table. It was all gluten-free and it was all vegetarian.

You know, back in my day, respecting the dietary needs and desires of others was usually limited to allowing people a fairly nonjudgmental freedom to be able to pick off the pizza toppings they didn't like. And vegetarians were often only given the choice of having salad as a meal when the bounty of the big table was brought. And you hoped that maybe it wasn't a salad that was pre-elled with real bacon. Back in my day, a little more recently, one of my children in junior high began to eat a vegan diet. No meat, no animal products, not even eggs or dairy or honey. Fortunately, this was early in the time when plant-based options were being sold in stores and even a couple of fast food restaurants had veggie burgers and cooked their fries in vegetable oil. So, it took some planning and it took some very diligent label reading, but it was very doable.

The third verse from Paul's letter to the Romans says

Those who eat everything must not despise those who abstain. Those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat for God has welcomed them.

Now that verse makes Paul appear very neutral on the subject, maybe even remarkably progressive for the first century. Unfortunately, as you heard in the preceding verse, he says when he's trying to describe the context of the debate he's going to have,

The opinions of people on this subject range from those who believe they may eat any sort of meat to those whose faith is so weak they only eat vegetables.

I heard some oo and a's even as we were having that read today. There's probably actually a third option that Paul doesn't mention here that there were people who would avoid certain meats; like some people might not eat pork or shellfish.

Now, because meat then and now is a major source of needed protein, vegetarians and vegans need to make sure they're getting enough protein from their non-meat sources. But that's not what Paul means when he says weak. He's not talking about being weak in the knees because you don't have enough protein. He's talking about what he describes as a weak choice not weak bodies.

Paul seems to be expanding here on a theme that he has addressed elsewhere in his letters. The church of Jesus' followers was attracting people from a wide variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. Most notably, Paul spends a lot of time seeking to reduce the turf protecting and the expectation extrapolations that arose from people (like him) with backgrounds within the Hebrew tradition because Paul saw as his main calling was to be able to welcome non-Jewish believers into this movement even though it began among a mostly exclusive group of people around Jesus in the Galilean Jewish regions and the Judean Jewish regions. Paul did this without expecting those new gentile (which meant everybody else) followers to convert to Judaism before they could become what we would eventually call Christian. And conversely, Paul didn't expect those who came from the Hebrew background to have to renounce their faith, to stop practicing their acts of faith in order to become Christian.

It took a lot of convincing to get people to hold back their judgments in favor of community unity and a greater good for the movement.

Today's passage, the *to meat or not to meat* passage, is a hint that even when the Jewish- Gentile differences

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are held off to the side, there were other things that might divide: other beliefs and differences came up from time to time.

I feel pretty confident that the desire to eat only vegetables was a tenant of some people's historic and cultural backgrounds. Their vegetarianism was a religious or cultural practice. It was important to who they were. It had been what they grew up with.

I find it deliciously ironic that Paul could talk in one moment that a particular diet dietary practice was a sign of a weak faith and then in the next breath say that neither dietary choice should judge the other for their choice because in his view God chooses them all.

In Paul's defense, the strong and weak faith argument may not be the way that we hear it often. It might mean less about a value judgment of *one is better than the other* and more about how forcefully people wanted the others to follow their rules. If that's the case, then the weak faith is the one that isn't able to defend itself well against the others or was in the minority or just wasn't able to get their point across. It does appear (from reading between the lines in Romans) that maybe it was the meat-eaters who were the most critical. *Why are you doing this? Turn back your old faith and just do what we do.* At minimum, Paul may have been sympathizing a bit with the meat eating crowd, although I'm pretty sure he didn't eat pork or shellfish. I think Paul, though, would have loved a tasty burger.

But let's not let Paul's intentional or unintentional irony get in the way of what is his central message in this passage, that whether you choose to eat meat or abstain, you do it in gratitude to God. Do what you do. It's the gratitude to God that's central to what is important. While we live, we live for Christ Jesus, not for the food that might be on our different plates.

Now, there are judgments on the tips of our tongues that will disrupt this community goal. And so sometimes we need to challenge ourselves to hold back; to let it go as an issue between you and your neighbor in faith. Not easy to do sometimes.

There are definitely times when expressing one's beliefs strongly and forcefully into a world where we are convinced that our perspective is desperately needed... especially when maybe it's issues of justice and dignity that are at stake. Those tend to be times we want to make sure we speak out and not just hold it back.

What the apostle Paul is asking for here is for the community to be able to develop an appropriate level of discretion to know when it might be appropriate to have a debate and see if there can be some kind of community consensus and when we might be only creating a conflict for conflict's sake. And so Paul invited the church to discover the difference between unnecessary intergroup squabbles and matters of faith and justice founded on a love of God and neighbor.

Even if our position within that squabble might be deeply and personally held, there may be times when we choose the whole community's needs because that issue isn't so central that it divides everyone. It needs to divide everyone.

So far in 2026, I've not yet been asked to officiate at any weddings. I did think that I had an inquiry a few days ago for a wedding on Thanksgiving weekend, but then when I looked closer at the note, it said 2027. And besides that potential one next year, I already have two confirmed weddings for 2026.

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There's a line that ministers often say in TVs and movies that has us associated with weddings. It may sound familiar: *if anyone present knows of any reason this couple should not be married, speak now or forever hold your peace*. I don't usually use that line because it implies *should this couple get married, are they a good match? Are you personally happy with this couple being a couple?* It implies that anyone's personal opinion on the subject matters. The truth is unless you are 16 or 17 years old, you don't need anyone's permission to get married. In fact, 15 year olds and under can't get married in Alberta unless the teenage bride is pregnant or already has a child. 16 and 17 year olds can get married but they need the consent of their parents or guardians unless they are granted a judicial exception.

And so what I ask couples in weddings (and I ask the couple not anyone else) is: *Do either of you know of any lawful impediment to you being married here today? Now's the time to declare it*. I usually do a dramatic pause for about two seconds and then I move into an opening prayer. It's not *should you get married*, it's *can you get married*. And it's a legal question. It's verbalizing the marriage license which they would have had to have gotten from a registry location. And it means: I'm not married to someone else currently. I am not seeking to marry a parent or a child of mine; or one of my blood siblings; and I'm not impaired to the point that I can't enter into a legal contract at this moment.

Having an opinion is not the same thing as it being a wise thing to share that opinion.

Give me the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed. Courage to change the things that should be changed and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Discovering the wise discipline of when to hold back and when to move forward with courage requires us to use both our hearts and our heads as vessels of faith.

Paul didn't see any reason for the food on the table to be a dividing line in the church. Just as Paul didn't see it as a dividing line in the church, whether you came from a Hebrew background or some other background.

Thanks be to God for this challenging but faithful work. Amen.

#266VU Amazing Grace

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