



“EVEN SO, WE PRACTICE ACCOUNTABILITY”

SCRIPTURE: ROMANS

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, September 17, 2023

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Romans 14:1-12

14:1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. 14:2 Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 14:3 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. 14:4 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. 14:5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 14:6 Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. 14:7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 14:8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 14:9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. 14:10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 14:11 For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." 14:12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

How do we, in our social cultural context, struggle with accountability?

For Paul—the struggle was a really tangled up multi religious, multicultural world in which public piety came with lots of assumptions. And, with echoes of his letters to the people of Corinth, these practices had gotten entangled with privilege, power, social capital, and social stratification based on economic status and resources.

Here Paul is flipping a few stereotypes about different manifestations of piety—not to commend conformity to a certain practice, but to invite reframing and reorienting for the sake of beloved community.

Food practices are where he spends his time—and instead of locating the strength of one's faith in the most strict observance, he flips it to say that those who restrict their eating the most are basically those who know they need that level of discipline to feel aligned with how they understand faithful living to look—they need the structure, the support, the limitations, to shore up their faith in a world that gave them lots of reasons to be faithless, or to do things that took them out of alignment with the ethic they believe God requires.

I can relate to that need to have boundaries, to have daily practices that support my body and nervous system in my aspiration to live a life centered in God's love and liberation.

I am not someone who can just eat anything—I have physiological reasons why I cannot eat anything put in front of me—celiac disease and dairy allergy. But those things are not the final reason why I restrict my eating.

Even with those health conditions, I could still choose to eat those things and just take the health consequences—and roll the dice with developing life threatening and painful chronic diseases. I could just decide I would rather eat what I want and live with pain, extreme fatigue, depression, and all sorts of other health impacts.

But I know that this world is already way too hard for me to metabolize. The cruelty of the world, the suffering, the meanness—all that has been so painful for me to see and experience my whole life. I feel it all in my body—I can feel the way energy is moving around this room. The suffering of the world is something I feel all the time—people, animals, trees. I do things like sit with a tree that fell in the woods and grieve with it.

So, my system needs lots of support to be able to use my energy to stay in contact with life, with community. My eating practices keep me here—they keep me healthy and able to engage in a world that is a lot! Otherwise, I would just be absorbed with my own pain instead of present in the pain we experience as created beings.

Paul's reframing is that such discipline does not make me more faithful, just more aware of my own limitations and vulnerabilities.

It would make zero sense for me to expect all of you to eat the way I do as a way to measure your faith. And it makes zero sense for you to judge me for doing what I need to do to be

healthy and to free up my energy for the work God calls me to instead of feeling unwell and wiped out all the time.

That part of Paul's teaching is probably not the challenging part for us—our social context is one in which we have some pretty habituated ways of understanding how each of us can need different things around food. And our individualized culture means we can be pretty good about thinking stuff like what we eat is nobody else's business.

The more challenging part of Paul's teaching is the part about accountability. We really struggle with how to do that and how to experience accountability as love, as something good for our bodies and our faith.

And Paul kinda makes it easy for us to assume we don't need practices of accountability—just leave that to God.

If we take a closer look at the spirit of making room for different ways of practicing faith, however, then we come to something that makes accountability practices something we need to be a healthy, thriving community of faith—and that is LOVE.

Accountability practices are about believing in someone's best possibilities. Accountability is about love.

Accountability is about believing in the strength of love to hold us as we work together to do right by each other. If I let someone hurt me over and over again and don't hold them accountable, I am struggling to believe in that person's full humanity and in the power of love, itself, to do hard things.

What does it look like and feel like to live in a culture that avoids accountability? What does it look like and feel like to exist in a culture that has an aversion to accountability? Well, it looks and feels a lot like white churches and white institutions.

White systems can spend a lot of our energy on being defensive, and rigid, and brittle. We can feign a collective fragility and dress it up like it is piety and propriety. White systems struggle with love, because whiteness was not created for love, it was created for oppression. And oppression is the antithesis of love.

We cannot love each other fully and at the same time accept the things that oppress and suppress and repress each other's humanity. This honoring of everyone's belovedness, this being able to see each other's best possibilities, this tender place is where accountability is born.

Accountability is not born in judgment, but in affection.

Accountability is not born in wanting to take someone down a peg or in competition for who is the most faithful, it is born in deep knowing—in the deep embodied knowing of our deep connection.

If I dismiss your humanity as a lost cause, I am dismissing my own humanity as a lost cause. How can I be fully alive if I am ok with your languishing?

Accountability is honoring your humanity, that you matter to me and that I believe I matter to you.

Paul wants to reframe the skewed kinds of accountability in the Roman community that was both competitive and judgemental. He redirectst people away from the practices themselves and toward what is at the center of the practices: God, in other words, LOVE.

We are accountable to God. We are accountable to love.

Practicing accountability with each other is not playing God, it is trying to be human differently.

Accountability is about believing in someone's best possibilities.

So why is it so hard for us to practice accountability? What precedes the “even so” in the “even so, we practice accountability”?

I can't answer that question for all of us—just like all those eating practices in Paul's community, we all have lots of reasons why it is hard to trust each other and hard to believe relationships are worth the work they require.

Even so, I know we are here because we hunger for a better world, we are ready to try something different than the things we keep doing that hurt ourselves and each other. We are here because part of us believes there is a way we can be together that doesn't have to hurt so much.

We can't get to a better world without accountability—without the depth of love for each other that says I want to stay in relationship with you so I am going to share some hard truth about the impact of your actions, without the depth of love that says I believe we both want to do right by each other.

Later this fall, the Power and Race Team (PART) is going to begin exploring and practicing what accountability can look like for us at GCPC—a white dominant system working on stopping the harm that whiteness inflicts on bodies, relationships, and communities. I hope you will make room for how Spirit is inviting you to participate in this exploration of practices of accountability.

Whatever your practices are around the work we are doing at GCPC—open yourself up to what is at the center. Where is God in the work you are doing? Where is love in the way you are orienting yourself to the work we are doing?

Love is the centrifuge of liberation. Love is the motivation and the manifestation—the power that moves our “even so” to the “we practice accountability.” And that is the food our souls need to truly be free.

Thanks be to God.