

September 17, 2023 – Romans 14:1-12

Adiaphora. Have you heard that word before? It's a strange sounding word to English speaking ears, because it's not an English word. It's a Greek word. And it means “indifferent.”

As in, “Where do you want to go to lunch? Wherever. I'm indifferent.” I want lunch. But I don't really have a strong opinion where to go. And there's certainly nothing that requires me to go one place or another. I don't have an appointment to meet someone at one restaurant or another. I don't have a food allergy preventing me from eating certain things. Our selection for lunch is complete adiaphora to me. Totally indifferent.

We don't usually use that word when we're talking about lunch, however. Most commonly, especially among Lutherans, the word is used to describe matters of doctrine and practice that are indifferent. Things that Scripture neither demands that we do, nor prohibits us from doing. Things to which God is indifferent when it comes to our salvation. And therefore we have freedom to decide for ourselves.

Because every day, you go through life doing things that aren't specified in God's Word. And we, as a church, together, make all sorts of decisions for our congregation to which God is fairly indifferent. The color of the carpeting is adiaphora. In fact, most decorating choices are adiaphora. Outside of the pastoral office itself, the governance of our church and the duties of our leaders are mostly adiaphora.

This is in contrast to the those facets of our church that are not adiaphora. The preaching of God's Word – and God's Word alone – is not an indifferent thing. Baptism in the name of the Triune God is not an indifferent thing. The regular administration of Christ's Holy Supper for the forgiveness of sins is not an indifferent thing. These are core doctrines of the church, about which God cares very much. They are very much not adiaphora.

So why do I bring this up? Well, in our Epistle Lesson today, St Paul talks a lot about adiaphora. Oh, he doesn't use that exact word. He refers in vs 1 to things that are “opinions.” The things that you think are best, but someone else might disagree with. Things that are left to your opinion because God's Word just doesn't tell us one way or another. He brings up two examples that were apparently hot topics among the Roman Christians.

The first is the issue of food. I think we all know at least a little about kosher laws among Jews. Don't eat pork. Don't eat shellfish. Don't mix meat and cheese. Wash every surface thoroughly so that your food doesn't come in contact with anything unclean.

And if you can't guarantee that the food you're eating has been properly handled, that the animals have been properly slaughtered, that every surface is as clean as it is supposed to be, then the general fallback position of every good Jew is to simply avoid meat altogether. Just eat fruits and vegetables. Become a vegetarian.

We actually see this recorded in the Old Testament. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have been taken into Babylonian captivity. King Nebuchadnezzar invites them to dine at his table. And so they play it safe and they only eat fruits and vegetables. Which thoroughly surprised him.

Apparently, there are Jewish converts to Christianity in Rome who are doing the same thing. Kosher meat that is slaughtered according to their high standards is in short supply and so they simply become vegetarians. Makes sense.

Or does it? Why are they still keeping kosher laws, after all? They're Christians. Jesus specifically told us that it's not what goes into our body that makes us unclean, but the thoughts and words and actions that come out of our heart that make us unclean. Jesus appeared to Peter in a dream and told him that he had declaring all animals to be clean. And the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 very pointedly declared that you did not need to keep kosher laws to be a Christian.

So why are they still so insistent on keeping kosher laws? Well, Paul says it's because they are weak people. Weak of faith. They know what Christ has done for them. They know that he has fulfilled the Law. They know that their sins are forgiven. They know that there is nothing about this food that will make them unclean in God's eyes. Whether or not they eat meat is complete adiaphora. But still, they cling to their old adherence to the Mosaic Law because... they're weak.

Again, he gives us a second example about church festivals. Guess what? Whether or not we celebrate Christmas or Easter is adiaphora. It's indifferent. I happen to think they are good and useful festivals of the church. In fact, I happen to think that the entire liturgical calendar is good and useful and worth celebrating. But no one is going hell if they stay home on Christmas Eve. And no one is going to heaven simply because they attended every single Easter sunrise service.

The same topic came up among the Romans as well. And it was probably even more complicated for them. Because they have the additional group of those who continued to observe all the old Jewish festivals mixed in with all of those who observed the newer Christian festivals that were just beginning to be established.

And so you've got chaos. People over here saying we must observe Passover. People over there saying we must observe Epiphany. These people are saying we should celebrate the Lord's Supper on Sunday morning. Those people are saying we should celebrate the Lord's Supper on Sunday evening. And to all of them, Paul says, "Knock it off. It's adiaphora. It's indifferent. Celebrate whenever you want. The point is to honor the Lord and give thank to God. So just make sure that whatever you do does that."

Adiaphora. It can be so divisive. And that's really what Paul wants to warn us about in this passage. Not only is adiaphora indifferent to our salvation. Adiaphora should be inconsequential to our fellowship.

Because we are all just trying to honor the Lord and give thanks to God. We are all just trying to honor the Lord who made the world and everything in it. We are all just trying to give thanks to the God who became man, lived, died, and rose again for our salvation. Those are the things that unify us. And if we keep them first and foremost, then these indifferent things seem a lot more... indifferent.

The truth is that we have more important things to worry about. Adiaphora tends to consume our time as a church. That's probably because adiaphora are those things that we can have an opinion about. That we can quarrel over.

The old Adam inside of us will always try to find something to divide us. He hates peace. He hates unity. He hates being part of the family of God. Like the prodigal son, he is a rebel who just wants to go off on his own and do his own thing. Follow his own opinion. And so he will find something to quarrel about.

Even if it's something silly like the pros and cons of being vegetarian or which holidays that we should have on our church calendar or the color of the carpeting in the sanctuary. It doesn't really matter how trivial it is. He'll find a way to argue about it. Because the real issue is that the old Adam just doesn't want to be part of a community with Christ as its head.

And so he passes judgement on his brother. He despises his brother for no good reason at all. He sets himself up as the only voice that matters because he refuses to bend his knee before the Lord. Before the one who sits on the judgement seat and will one day demand an account of all of us. The old Adam wants to divide the church because he doesn't want to be part of the church at all.

And that is why he must die. *"If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."* The old Adam has died to the Lord. He was drowned in the waters of Holy Baptism. He was nailed to the cross with Christ. He pretends to be in charge, but he's a corpse with no power over us.

Today, you are here because you live to the Lord. A new man woke up this morning and said, "Yes, I think I will go to church. Because I want to hear God's Word and want to receive his sacrament and want to be part of this family called Immanuel Lutheran Church." The old Adam in you didn't come up with that idea. He'd rather be at home asleep right now.

And by the Word you heard this morning and by the sacrament you will receive, that new man is strengthened in this life we live together. He is strengthened to set aside his own opinions for the good of his brother. Who may be strong in faith or weak in faith. But who is still saying what he's saying and doing what he does because he wants to honor the Lord and give thanks to his God, just like you do.

Our lives are not our own. For we were bought at a great price. Our debt has been paid. We are the Lord's. And only the Lord will enable us to stand as one. Amen.