

I. (Advanced Organizer)

- A. Last week Jeanne invited me to listen to a podcast episode. She had heard it and felt like it resonated as we prepared for our first in-person gathering. When I took a listen myself, I understood why.
1. The podcast was one hosted **Brene Brown, and on this episode she was speaking with Priya Parker**, author of a best selling book called *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. Priya is a group facilitator and often works in the area of conflict resolution. As her book title names, she's also known for helping folks think about collective identity and how that can be enriched by being thoughtful about how we meet and gather. In this particular podcast episode, Brene had invited Priya to come on and talk about the ways we think about gathering after the pandemic and the various issues that will come up as we do so.
 2. Priya was clear that this whole return to more in-person life, this is complicated stuff. There's a lot to work through. We are in what Priya called a **"moment of deep transition"**. Brene calls those kinds of seasons, where things are being shifted in a major way, "the bounce". The bounce is a time of change when there's a lot of work to do to figure out how life works now. There's a lot of conversations to be had about what comes next. Priya shared some of her concerns about this bounce time like this: *"I would say that at the deepest level, I'm concerned about people, organizations, teams, default racing back to assuming that they're trying to race back to something without pausing and asking, "What have we learned during this time about our work, about how we work? About at the core of it, what it is we do and what is needed right now? What have we learned about things like access and equity in this year of reckoning?" And I'm not worried about the conversations people are having to figure out how do we do this? I'm worrying about people skipping those conversations and just focusing on the logistics."*
 3. I start sharing this insight from Priya Parker because last week we did the thing that she named would be difficult. The is why Jeanne felt like the episode resonated, we are doing the very thing the was there to discuss. We have begun gathering in-person again. **We had our first experiment in gathering on a Sunday in our "bounce"**. And that came after weeks of making space for conversation around all of this, which I think we're benefitting from.
- B. What both the women in the podcast name, and our own experience is showing is these conversations are vital because **while there may be much excitement and enthusiasm about beginning to gather in person again, there is also potential for for anxiety and even conflict**. Jeanne and I have witnessed this in our dialogue with folks over the last month or so. There are some in our community who are ready to be done with all this distancing and masks and feel like all of the safety stuff we're doing is overkill already, especially since so many in our community are fully vaccinated. But there are others who feel really grateful we're taking all of the precautions we are now. Perhaps they're immunocompromised and so haven't been able to get the vaccine for health reasons, or maybe they're parents of kids under 12 who aren't eligible for the vaccine, or maybe even with the vaccine, they're anxious about being in a larger group of people. So how do we hold the tension of these things? **How do we as Haven think about how we gather again and why it matters?**
- C. Thus far, much of what we've talked about together has to do with science and public health recommendations. Last week we held a gathering that was implementing a pretty stringent set of protocols that were originally crafted in the height of the pandemic, before there were vaccines and changing guidance from the CDC. As the situation changes, our case counts go down, more vaccines are available and our state begins to more actively reopen, **in some**

ways it makes things easier. It feels like there may be more opportunities to relax. In other ways, it makes things more complicated. Even amongst public health experts there are different opinions about how we all should be navigating this partially vaccinated world. There are differing opinions on what “the bounce” looks like. And, as a pastor, as I’ve been thinking about these issues, one of the layers of thought I’ve been having is how we think about these questions not simply scientifically or sociologically, but also theologically. As a spiritual community, how does our spiritual orientation come to bear on how we think though some of these challenging issues regarding how we gather? **Does our Jesus-centered tradition have anything to say about this?**

D. Well, it might not surprise you to find out that I think it actually does. I think that even though our sacred texts and the traditions that arise from them came millennia before conversations about Zoom services and vaccines, **there are relevant ethics explored there that can bring wisdom and spiritual insight to how we think about moving forward.** And an example of this that has been coming to mind a lot for me in recent weeks is found in kind of an obscure place. It’s found in a letter to a church in Rome written by one of the early church leaders, the Apostle Paul, as a group there dealt with their own set of thorny challenges that the community in Rome was trying to navigate in a time of “bounce” for them. No doubt the context and the issues they were struggling through are very different then our own. But I do think **taking a look at what issues made gathering and connection challenging for folks in their day, might have some wisdom for us as well.** So as we continue this transition together, I’m gonna invite you to consider a scenario with me from the early church and think about how it might speak into our own situations as we move forward.

II. (Exploring the scripture)

A. Before we look at this letter to this particular church in Rome, let me set up some of context for what was going on there. And as I do, I **do want to acknowledge my friend Ken Wilson in Ann Arbor who has written a book that talks about this particular conflict in the church in Rome and how understanding it might help churches in our day deal with their own controversies.**

B. So the church in Rome that Paul was writing to was having some challenges with group unity because they had a couple of **segments of the group who had very different perspectives and practices when it came to the way they were living and practicing their faith.** Much of this was cultural and reflected different groups coming together and trying to build diverse community; something we are always trying to grow in here at Haven. In this case there were two particular groups that were having a hard time navigating cultural difference together - **those Christians in the community that came from a Jewish background or were more influenced in their faith practice by Judaism, and those who were not, those who were Gentile, perhaps more influenced by the practices of Rome.**

C. There were a number of ways that different cultural practices between the Jewish and Gentile Jesus-followers created challenges, but we’re just going to look at just one that Paul is addressing in this letter. **It was the challenge of whether or not it was appropriate for Christians in Rome to eat meat.**

1. So what was the problem with eating meat? We live in a place where some are vegetarians, some are vegans, some are gluten free, and we’re able to make it work. What was the big deal? For the people Paul is talking about, early Christians living in Rome in the first century, it was a big deal. Choosing to eat meat was about more than simply a dietary preference. For many of them, **that choice was about how do you think about participating in idolatry.** Generally in Rome in that period the meat was butchered in

pagan temples as part of pagan religious rituals. Understandably, for some, particularly those from a Jewish background, **to consume this meat could be seen as participating in the worship of idols.** The meat had actually been sacrificed unto Roman gods. So some Roman Christians felt sincerely that to eat meat in Rome violated the first commandment. In addition, the meat wasn't kosher, it hadn't been properly drained of its blood, which for many centuries, was a really important thing to do if you were a good god-fearing Jew. So for those who had spent their entire lives learning and embodying worship of God in these concrete ways - avoiding idol worship and avoiding meat that was not drained properly of its blood - it was natural to believe that faithfulness to Jesus should include these kinds of practices.

2. But **not all the people in the church felt that way.** For some in the church, particularly Gentiles, the fact that the meat was sacrificed in a pagan temple didn't really seem problematic. Those followers of Jesus might have said, "I'm just eating it, I'm not actively worshiping anyone other than Jesus, so I'm not going to be concerned with where my meat has been or what has been done to it." And they didn't have the same cultural practices regarding kosher meat, so they could care less about the blood. For them, their eating was not relevant to their faith in Jesus.
 3. So what does this have to do with church? Well the challenge was that **in the early church, eating together was a significant part of their weekly gathering.**
 4. Churches in that day met on Sunday evening in someone's home. They worshiped together, they celebrated communion, they heard teachings about Jesus, or read pastoral letters like Romans, and then a central important piece of their gathering was that they ate together. So what was a gathering host do? Do you serve meat at the communal meal or not? The difference between those who were deeply offended by the meat and those who thought it was not a big deal would be starkly in their face every time they gathered and sat down to eat together. **Some might feel like they couldn't attend at all if meat was on the menu. This was a significant problem.**
- D. So how did Paul deal with it? Let's go ahead and look at what Paul shares in his letter to the church in Rome, beginning with Chapter 14, verse 1. I've trimmed the passage a bit because it's kinda long, but we'll look at what he's saying as throughout Chapter 14 and into 15.
- 14:1 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand...**
- 10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11 It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God."**
- 12 So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. 13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. 14 I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. 15 If your**

brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall....

15:5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

III. Breaking It Down - So in this passage, what does Paul say to this community in the midst of their tension over this meat eating issues? I'm gonna highlight a couple things this morning that I think might be useful for us, too.

A. First; he emphasizes **Acceptance over Agreement.**

1. This passage begins and ends with a call to “accept” one another. It’s not a call to convince. It’s not a call to come to the same place. It’s not a call to separate. It’s a call to accept one another, even in the midst of disagreement.
2. This is a profound word to a community in conflict, because it’s so rarely experienced. Even for communities like ours. We’re in Berkeley, in the Bay Area, an area that has a reputation for “tolerance” but **what Paul is calling the community to goes beyond that.** He is acknowledging the issues at hand are debatable. In our translation, he calls them “disputable matters”, but rather than let their disputes become a place where the community feels like they have to separate, or one group ends up overpowering another, Paul calls them to mutual acceptance, using the Divine and their acceptance of all of us, as demonstrated by Jesus as the example. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”
3. Now I want to highlight an important way in which Paul’s issue is different than our own if we’re thinking about masks and distancing. In Ken’s book, he takes pains to demonstrate that the issues Paul is addressing in this part of Roman’s, the meat-eating being one of them is a first order moral concern for their community. It’s not just about health, for folks in their community this was about someone’s standing before God. Likely none of us are thinking our neighbor is *offending the Divine* simply by wearing or not wearing a mask. So if Paul is calling a community to mutual acceptance, even when they feel the stakes are faithfulness to God, how much more should we be able to practice this kind of mutual acceptance?
4. What does this mutual acceptance look like? For Paul here, it means that rather than siding with one group against another, Paul is calling each party to take responsibility for their reactions to others.
 - a) Paul names the two groups he’s speaking to. Personally, I think his names are not the wisest. In what probably felt a bit galling to the more conservative folks in this community, folks who abstained from meat, **he called them “weak in faith”, essentially because their consciences weren’t “strong” enough to handle eating**

meat, as he saw it. Those who felt fine eating the meat—mostly Gentiles—were the “strong.” Many scholars note how in general these categories bear a lot of resemblance to our contemporary categories of “conservative” and “liberal”. The more scrupulous groups on an issue, the more conservative, here are called the weak; while the “strong” correspond more to our contemporary liberals.

- b) Now I’m gonna name that, and also name how because of the politicization of everything Covid, for much of the pandemic terms like “conservative” and “liberal” have really broken down when it comes to taking precautions. Across the country, those of us who might consider ourselves politically more progressive, have been the most “conservative” when it comes to covid precautions. So how these words of Paul map with particular debatable issue we may be dealing with really depends on the issue. For us, I’ll refrain from here on out using “conservative” and “liberal” because of that confusion, but invite you to keep those things in mind. Perhaps we might think of the groups as the “more concerned” and “less concerned”.
 - c) Now personally, despite the loaded terms, I do not think Paul is **trying to call the more concerned group - what he terms the “weak” group - inferior**. Even if Paul does not personally agree with this group, (as it becomes clear: he doesn’t) he understands their point of view. He respects that they come to it from a place of seriously trying to honor Jesus. Paul seems to see that as a worthy stance that must be honored. And Paul goes on to tell each group the problem he sees with how they are engaging in conflict.
 - d) In 14:3 he puts it like this: “The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.” So to the “weak”, to those who are more concerned, perhaps more scrupulous on an issue, Paul says not to judge their neighbors. Don’t be so focused on whether others are doing something right or wrong. Many of us have had to leave churches or other communities because we were on the receiving end of that kind of moral judgment. We know personally how dangerous it can be,
 - e) But Paul doesn’t stop with critiquing the “weak”. He is challenging the “strong in faith”, too. To the “strong”, to those “less concerned” about the issue, he challenges them not to look at the “weak” with contempt. To not look down on them. He sees how those less concerned folks tend to roll their eyes at their more scrupulous brothers and sisters, perhaps dismiss them as being unenlightened, or old-fashioned. In our day we can hear talk about the coastal elites looking down on middle America, and while I’d argue this whole perception is overblown, it lands because there is some element of truth to it. But Paul will not have it. Though he himself falls in the “strong” camp, he calls others in it to something different and challenging. **He points out that treating their brothers with contempt is also a form of judgement, just as harmful as the judgement of their more scrupulous brothers and sisters, and he calls them to lay it down.**
5. As a community that seeks to be **safe, diverse, and Jesus-centered this is an important ethic to keep in mind in all kinds of areas**. We don’t all share the same experiences or expectations, and that’s a good thing, but it also means we have to be careful not to impose our own experiences and expectations on others. So when it comes to covid protocols - though folks in other arenas may shame people for taking their mask off, or for keeping it on, we don’t want to be a part of that kind of social pressure. We want to be

sensitive to where others may be coming from, particularly those who see things differently than we do, looking with curiosity and care rather than annoyance or contempt.

a) That may even mean that we all accept what Priya Parker calls “**micro-moments of rejection**” that are sure to come in the weeks and months to come. *“We are all going to experience micro-moments of perceived rejection over the next many months. And when I say micro-moment, I mean, say the invitation is perfect..., and then you walk into the room and someone reaches out their hand and someone leans their body back, that’s what I mean by a micro-moment of rejection, or somebody walks over and somebody else moves away, we don’t fully know how to do this, and it’s going to be really clunky, and I think part of naming that as a leader to de-personalize some of that perceived rejection, to allow the stumbling and fumbling around...”* I found that really helpful to hear named. We might feel a twinge of rejection or social awkwardness when we come together with different needs and expectations, but choosing to accept one another means that ok. We accept the awkwardness of learning each other’s needs. And the process of those changing over time as we all get more comfortable. **We don’t take it personally and we don’t blame others, we simply own together that we’re gonna fumble through this and find our way in relationship with each other.** These micro-moments are gonna happen in all kinds of contexts we find ourselves in in the coming months. What if at Haven we could feel a sense of safety in them together, knowing it’s ok be awkward right now. We can handle it.

B. The other thing I see Paul doing here that I think is relevant for us, is that **he prioritizes inclusion and access.**

1. Paul make it clear that he personally thinks it’s fine to eat the meat, but for the community his emphasis is on how can the most number of people be included? **How can we eliminate obstacles so no-one is excluded who wants to be there?** “Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister” he says, and clearly when it comes to this, he sees serving meat as an obstacle to community. Ultimately, if some folks in the community need there not to be meat served in order for them to feel like in good conscience they can participate, then when they’e in that setting, the group should avoid the meat. Exercising the freedom to eat it is not as important as all feeling like they can be a part of the group. **Group care and belonging matter more than personal freedom here.**

2. I wonder if when Paul was making that point, he was thinking about words of Jesus himself, like those related in Matthew 18.

a) ***At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 He called a child, had him stand among them, 3 and said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn around and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven! 4 Whoever then humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me.***

6 “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a huge millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the open sea. 7 Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! It is necessary that stumbling blocks come, but woe to the person through whom they come.

- b) Now I don't think Jesus really wanted to drown anyone. He was a master at teaching through hyperbole. The point is that Jesus clearly cared about access being made for all who were excluded, particularly those who had been on the margins, often because of low social status, age, illness or disability. In the same way, we want to be thoughtful about how we make space for folks who may have particular access needs, and prioritize practices that increase access over practices that increase personal comfort. **So meeting outside has its challenges. Logistically it's a bit harder to set up a band. Last weekend we had good weather but it's unpredictable. Inside is more comfortable in lots of ways. Still for this season, if it means that our space is more accessible to those who are medically more vulnerable, or to kids who can't be vaccinated yet, I'm happy to keep setting up outside until we're confident inside will be accessible too.**
3. Recently some folks in our community read *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. In it, the author talks a lot about access and putting access needs of those in the disability community front and center rather than as an afterthought. Leah is a performance artist, so much of her work deals with making performance venues accessible, so in a discussion on that issue, I found her words relevant.
- a) *"I am all in favor of livestreaming as being a way to make performance accessible to folks who are unable to make it to the show because of money, sickness, fatigue, etc., but livestreaming is not an okay fix for an inaccessible venue—sick, disabled, Deaf, and crazy folks would like to be part of the community gathering to witness performance too."*
- b) Those words stuck with me as we are in the process of setting up our own gatherings with a virtual option for those who prefer to participate that way. How do we keep all of our spaces as accessible as possible, through both virtual and in-person participation?
- c) How do we allow this experience of forced isolation that all of us have had over the last year impact how we think about access in general? Do we let ourselves be shaped by it in ways that say, "it's not ok with us for anyone to feel that they can't be connected", so whatever we do next should be more accessible than whatever we were doing before.
- C. To be clear, I don't think there are simple, clear straightforward answers to all of these questions. **They're "disputable matters" because that's the case.** We don't want to be cavalier and insensitive, but we don't want to be ruled by anxiety either. It's not always cut and dry. There wasn't a simple straightforward answer to the question of meat sacrificed to idols, and there aren't going to always be straightforward answers for us either.
- D. What matters is that **we work through these issues together as a community, remembering the ultimate rule of love, the ultimate Jesus-centered guidepost of the treating one another as we would want to be treated, paying close attention to the particular needs of the most vulnerable among us.** So it doesn't mean that we can never relax our covid protocols. I am confident as the weeks and months go by, and public health recommendations change and people feel more at ease in public, many of us - perhaps not all - but many of us probably will take off our masks together. At some point this year we will probably move inside. Some of us may soon give consent to one another to share a hug or sit closer than six feet away. But it matters how we get to those places. We want to get there as a collective, making sure that all of us feel heard and seen and cared for.
- E. **So we're gonna keep having conversations.** We're gonna keep experimenting in this time of "bounce". We're gonna beta test new ways of gathering, some of which may work well, and

some of which may not. And we'll do all of this experimentation, all the dialogue, all of this trial and error with the goal of **creating better ways of gathering that more deeply embody our values perhaps than we've yet had**. And in all of it, I invite you to remember, Haven, that we want to practice acceptance where we don't have agreement. We want to prioritize access and inclusion. And we want to **celebrate that we have found acceptance and belonging with God**, and it is our honor and joy to extend that same acceptance and belonging to one another. Amen.

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

1. What does it look like to prioritize acceptance over agreement? What are the challenges to that?
2. How might we grow in access and inclusion in this season?