

*“We Are The Lord’s!”*

The Apostle Paul’s words in today’s Lectionary New Testament Epistle Reading raise two important subjects. One of them has to do with whether or not people should judge one another. The other topic has to do with the purpose of our activities and how our lives and even our deaths are connected to our relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, many congregations and individual Christians have either been ignorant of what Paul wrote in our Scripture or they have decided to reject the openness and tolerance he called the Roman Church members to exhibit through it. It is also unfortunate, how Paul, having been a Pharisee of the Pharisees, periodically backslid to the judgmentalism of those religious legalists. In our Reading, the Apostle was very much in line with the emphasis of our God Is Still Speaking approach. Let’s recall Paul’s message in portions of **verses 3-4**, *“The person ... is not to pass judgment on the one who will eat anything; for God has accepted that person. Who are you to judge the servants of someone else? It is their own Master Who will decide whether they succeed or fail. And they will succeed, because the Lord is able to make them succeed.”*

The following is a rabbinic story titled, “The Rabbi’s Gift,” as told by Rabbi Jeffrey Summit. This tale or parable supports Paul’s emphasis on openness and mutual support and respect, and further, illuminates the benefits of succeeding in following that approach. Summit explains, “The story is told of a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once it was a great order, but as a result of the waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeen and eighteen centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteen, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the woods surrounding the monastery there was a little cabin that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a retreat. The old monks could always sense when the rabbi was visiting the cabin. ‘The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again,’ they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and ask for any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of this visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. ‘Yes. I know how it is,’ he exclaimed. ‘The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.’ So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. When the time came for the abbot to leave, they embraced one another. ‘It has been a wonderful thing that we have talked after all these years,’ the abbot said. ‘But is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?’

‘No, I am sorry,’ the rabbi responded, ‘I have no advice to give you.’ But then the rabbi paused and said quietly to the abbot, ‘But, there is one thing I have to tell you: One of you is the Messiah.’

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, ‘Well, what did the rabbi say?’

‘He couldn’t help,’ the abbot answered. ‘We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving — he said that one of us was the Messiah! Maybe it’s something from Jewish mysticism. I don’t know what he meant.’

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks began to think about this and wondered whether the rabbi’s words could actually be true? The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, who is it? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant that Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly, he couldn’t have meant Brother Jonathan! Jonathan gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Jonathan is virtually always right, often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Jonathan, but surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then almost mysteriously he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Could Philip be the Messiah? Of course, the rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? Oh God, me?”

**“As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might actually be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.”**

“Because the monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, it so happened that people occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. And as they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. And it happened that within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi’s gift, a vibrant center of light and spirit.”

Rabbi Jeffrey concludes the story, **“How we judge and treat the people around us, on a simple day to day level, not only determines our relationship with them but the very quality of life in our community.”** “Whether that community is the floor of a dorm, a culture house, an apartment, a sorority or fraternity, an organization, the administration or the faculty of the University, our small worlds can be transformed when we look at another human being and understand: this person has merit and worth. There are things I can learn from this person.” (Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Neubauer Executive Director, Tufts Hill, Tufts University; “The Rabbi’s Corner,” September 25, 2004, “Judging Others, Judging Ourselves”)

Friends, many among us are here because we have observed and experienced such respect, welcome, acceptance, and agape love! **The God Is Still Speaking motto states, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!”** Our Divine Parent enables us to succeed in our living the New Life in Christ and the New Faith Relationship with God and one another. The lives of a significant number of persons will be transformed as they experience our respect, welcome, acceptance, and agape love.

Now, let’s move to the latter portion of our Scripture and consider the insight’s Paul provides about the purpose of our lives and how that connects with our Relationships with our Divine Parent and God’s Son, Jesus Christ. The Apostle wrote in **verse 6, “Those who think highly of a certain day do so in honor of the Lord; those who will eat anything do so in honor of the Lord, because they give thanks to God for the food. Those who refuse to eat certain things do so in honor of the Lord, and they give thanks to God.”** Our lives are to be lived in honor of God! Now, that can be taken or understood in several different ways. Unfortunately, popular, contemporary, religious culture has tended to frame this call to honor our Creator in everything we do, as God’s Egotistical Demand – a requirement or “Commandment of God”. However, if we recognize we are talking about how we respond to the Agape Love our Divine Parent has shown us in God’s Only Son’s suffering, death, and resurrection, then we are, instead, responding with great thanks – gratitude and in recognition and honor for all our Almighty God has stooped down to do for us and all of humanity! It is very much a matter of our natural and appropriate response toward our most valued Relationship Partner – our Creator and the Word made Flesh!

The Apostle Paul pointed toward this Relationship between us, all people, and our Divine Parent in **verse 7 and then verses 8-9, “We do not live for ourselves only, and we do not die for ourselves only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”** We are not to be self-centered, instead, Paul explained we have this relationship of belonging to the Lord – to God and Jesus Christ in response to God’s Agape Loving Deeds for us and all people, **“For Christ died and rose to life in order to be the Lord of the living and of the dead.”** Saying “whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” declares we live our lives in response to and following the example of the Almighty’s Agape Love for all people, even though we have not earned such Forgiveness, Grace, Mercy, Healing, Reconciliation, Invitation, Welcome, and Acceptance! Our Still Speaking God and our Lord Jesus Christ have given us this Gift of Faith in the New Relationship with our Divine Parent and in the New Life in Christ. **Following the example of our Divine Parent’s Agape Love and Jesus’ respect, welcoming, and love of all people, we are persons, who whether we live or die, do it to glorify God’s Amazing Love for us and all people!**  
Amen.