

Free to Sit Still

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

POPCORN IN THE DARK

There is a moment most of us know from the inside, even if we have never named it. You are in a room full of people. Something happens. Someone stands. Someone starts to move. Someone begins to agree. And before you have decided anything at all, some part of you is already leaning that direction. Not because you were persuaded. Because everyone around you was moving, and staying still had suddenly become its own kind of statement, one you did not particularly want to make.

I know this moment specifically because it has found me in that same seat, in the dark, at my son's dance performances. It was a ballet theatre organization, but in the spring they experimented with more contemporary and modern dance themes. You know, the kind that does not always resolve the way you expect, the kind you sometimes leave uncertain whether you liked it.

A few springs ago, at the August Wilson Center downtown, one of those pieces ended. And in the darkness before the house lights came up, the standing ovation started. Not all at once. One seat here. Two seats over there. No pattern to it at first. Like popcorn in a kettle: scattered pops that had nothing to do with one another until suddenly they had everything to do with one another. And then the popping was everywhere. And I could feel, more than see, that I was one of the last people still sitting.

So I stood. Not because the piece had moved me. I wasn't convinced it deserved what it was getting. I stood because everybody around me was standing, and I did not want to be the one who didn't.

I have noticed since then that this was not the first time this has happened to me, and it will not be the last. Because it isn't really about ballet. It is about how much of what we do, we do because of what everybody around us is already doing.

And Paul knows something about that. Christians in Rome were divided over food and calendars. Some Christians believed they were free to eat anything. Others believed their conscience required them to abstain. Some observed particular days as holy. Others treated every day alike. And everybody, apparently, had an opinion

about everybody else. The ones who ate looked down on the ones who didn't. The ones who abstained judged the ones who ate.

And right in the middle of it Paul says:

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Romans 14:5

Not convinced by the room. Not convinced by what the person three seats over is doing. Not even convinced by what everybody at your end of the pew seems to think. Fully convinced in your own mind, before God.

And that is harder than it sounds. Because sometimes we aren't really convinced of anything. We are simply moving with the room. We stand because the room stands. We laugh because everybody else laughed. We become indignant because everybody else is indignant. We repeat the opinion everybody around us is repeating.

And sometimes we judge our brother, or despise him, as Paul says in verse 10, not because we have carefully examined the matter before God, but because we have borrowed the judgment of the people around us.

THE JUDGMENT SEAT THAT ISN'T OURS

And Paul says: No. Because there is somebody else in the room, someone whose presence matters infinitely more than everybody else's. The Lord. Paul says:

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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.

Romans 14:7–8

There it is. You do not belong to the room. You belong to the Lord. And that changes everything.

Because the real problem in Rome was not food. It wasn't calendars. It wasn't whether somebody ate pork or vegetables or whether Tuesday was different from Wednesday. The problem was that Christians had begun sitting in a chair that did not belong to them. The judgment seat.

Paul asks:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?

Romans 14:10

And then he reminds them:

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Romans 14:10

Notice the direction Paul turns our eyes. Not sideways. Upward. I am looking at you. You are looking at me. I'm wondering what you are doing. You're wondering what I'm doing. I'm deciding whether you're a sufficiently good Christian. You're deciding whether I am.

And Paul says, essentially: would the two of you stop looking at each other for a minute? There is already a Judge, and neither one of you is Him.

THE ONE WHO STOOD IN OUR PLACE

And here is where this becomes Gospel. Because the One before whom you stand is the One who stood in your place. Paul puts the center of the whole passage in verse 9:

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Romans 14:9

Christ died and lived again. That is why you are His. The Lord before whom you stand is not some distant examiner waiting for you finally to get everything right. He is the Lord who came down into your flesh, who carried your sins, who went to the cross under the judgment that belonged to you, who entered death itself, and who came out the other side alive.

So yes, one day I will give an account of myself to God. But I will stand before God as one for whom Christ has already died, as one whom Christ has claimed, as one whose sins Christ has carried, as one whose condemnation Christ has borne, as one whose grave Christ has already defeated.

That changes the way I look at the person sitting three seats over. Because if Christ is Lord of me, I don't need the room's approval. And if Christ is Lord of him, I don't get to take Christ's place.

That is the freedom Paul gives us here. I don't have to follow the crowd, and I don't have to control the crowd. I don't have to make everybody agree with me, and I don't have to pretend I agree with everybody else. I am free to stand before Christ with an honest conscience, and I am free to let my brother do the same.

FREE TO SIT STILL

Which brings me back to that dark theater. The performance ends. One person stands. Then another. Pop. Pop. Pop. And pretty soon everybody is standing. And there I am, still sitting, feeling that strange little pressure that says: well? What are you going to do?

Maybe next time I'll stand. Maybe next time I'll sit. That isn't really Paul's concern. His concern is why. Am I doing what I am doing because everybody else is doing it? Am I refusing to do it merely because everybody else is doing it? Am I looking sideways to see what everybody else thinks? Or can I simply live before the Lord?

That reaches far beyond a standing ovation. Before you nod along with a conversation, ask yourself whether you actually believe what is being said. Before you join everybody else's outrage, ask whether you have actually judged the matter rightly. Before you condemn another Christian over something Scripture has left free, remember who occupies the judgment seat. And before you become frightened because you find yourself standing alone, remember whose approval you actually need.

Paul's final word this morning is:

So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Romans 14:12

Each of us. Not of the room. Not of the fellow three seats over. Not of the sister whose conscience differs from mine. Of himself.

And strangely enough, that judgment does not leave the Christian frightened. It leaves us free. Because I already know the One before whom I will stand. He is the One who died for me. He is the One who rose for me. He is the One who claimed me in Holy Baptism. He is the One who forgives me when I follow the room, and forgives me when I judge the room, and forgives me when I climb into the judgment seat that belongs to Him alone. And He is the One who will raise me from the dead.

So I don't need to spend my life watching the room. "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." That is enough.

Amen.