



What Belongs at the Center
Romans 14:1-12
September 20, 2026

Rev. Ann Palmerton
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

There are some things in life that really matter. And then there are things we are absolutely convinced matter ... even though, if we stop to think about it, they really don't.

We discover this in traffic. Someone cuts us off, and in the space of about three seconds we have figured out what kind of person they are, what kind of family they came from, and maybe even what's wrong with our whole culture. Someone gets in the checkout line ahead of us. Someone parks badly. Someone is walking too slowly in front of us when we're in a hurry. And suddenly this is no longer a minor inconvenience. It is a character issue.

We do this with other people's habits, too. There is a right way to load a dishwasher. There is a right way to grill a steak. There is a right way to pack a car. And if you live with someone - a spouse, a partner, a roommate, a family member - you may have discovered that there is a right way to do all three. And somehow, the person you live with didn't get the memo!

We have our preferences. Our opinions. Our ways of doing things. And somehow, without us even noticing it, those preferences become principles. Something begins as "I like it this way" and becomes "This is the right way." Before long, we aren't only doing things differently. We're judging each other.

In Romans, this human tendency interests the Apostle Paul. The early church in Rome wasn't a church where everyone agreed. They disagreed about food. They disagreed about which days were holy. They had deeply held convictions about how to honor God. Paul doesn't tell them to settle their arguments. He tells them to welcome one another.

That can be a surprisingly difficult assignment. Paul sees behind the simple question of "Who's right?" to a deeper question, "What matters more, being right, or belonging to one another in Christ?"

Paul writes, "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

That's where we're going today: distinguishing between what's essential from what isn't and caring about things that deserve to be at the center. Many of us know how difficult that can be.

Years ago, after my father died, I flew home to be with my mother. I was surprised by how much I wanted to clean. I scrubbed and I organized. I know now that cleaning was one of the ways I was trying to manage my grief. If I could clean things and put them in order, maybe I could somehow put my grief in order, too.

My mother had a drawer full of twisty ties. And when I say full, I mean full. There must have been 500 or 1,000 of them in there. I decided it was time for her to let them go. Not only was I right, but I had a very compelling argument: No one needs 1,000 twisty ties. My mother disagreed. In fact, she vehemently disagreed. So, I backed away from the twisty tie drawer.

Eventually I realized what I couldn't see in the moment: The problem wasn't that I cared about the twisty ties. The problem was I was so certain I knew what the twisty ties meant, and what my mother needed, that I couldn't see what was actually happening. My mom was grieving, too.

Grief can do that. So can fear, anger, anxiety, and even love. Something small becomes charged with meaning because something bigger is at work. Sometimes we don't even know that's what we're doing. We decide someone is being unreasonable, or difficult. But we don't know the whole story. We don't know what they're carrying.

That's one reason Paul's words in Romans 14 matter. Before we rush to judge another person, before we decide they are making too much of something, Paul asks us to pause. What really matters here? What belongs at the center?

My experience with my mom helps me understand what Paul is getting at. Not everything we care about deserves the same weight. Some things are essential. Some things aren't. And when we confuse the two, small things can take on a weight they weren't meant to carry.

Paul takes it one step further. He asks another question: "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?" It's uncomfortable because judging another person can feel strangely satisfying. We see someone do something we dislike, and almost instantly we have a story about them. We don't just think, I don't like what they did. We think, I know what kind of person they are. Suddenly one moment has become a whole person.

I learned that lesson in a memorable way this summer in St. John's, Newfoundland. One night we watched the FIFA semifinals in a local pub. It was packed with people cheering for both teams, talking, laughing, having a great time.

And then I noticed one man. A group of men who appeared to be Middle Eastern came in and sat at a reserved table in front of him. He immediately became irritated and accused them of blocking his view. He complained loudly. They ignored him. When they started cheering, he became even louder, obnoxiously loud.

I judged him. *What a grump. What a bigot.* I had him figured out. I felt pretty good about having sized him up. I knew what kind of person he was. Then, as the match was winding down, something caught me off guard.

That same man got up, walked over and started talking with the men he had been complaining about. They talked for several minutes. Nothing dramatic. No great reconciliation. Just a friendly conversation about soccer between strangers.

And I thought: Well, now what do I do with that? Because I had made a whole person out of a moment. I don't think my first reaction was necessarily wrong. His behavior bothered me. It was reasonable to notice it and to think, I don't like what you're doing. What was wrong was how quickly I moved from "I don't like what you're doing" to "I know who you are." That's the difference between discernment and judgment.

We need discernment. We need to be able to recognize what is harmful or unjust or cruel. Following Jesus does not mean pretending that everything is fine. But judgment takes us somewhere else. Judgment says, "I know your heart. I know what kind of person you are. I know why you did that."

Paul asks: Who gave you that job? “Who are you to pass judgment on another?” It's okay to disagree. It's important to discern right from wrong. But we are not given the job of deciding who another person is. There is only one Judge. It isn't me. And it isn't you.

So, if we're not the judge, what are we supposed to do? The Christian life isn't about caring less. It's about learning what is worthy of our care, and what deserves to be at the center. Some things really do matter: the dignity of every person created in God's image. Love matters. Justice matters. Welcome matters.

Every generation has a way of taking the things it cares about and making them bigger than they are. We turn preferences into principles. A disagreement can start to feel like a threat. A small irritation can become a judgment about someone else.

So here's a question worth asking: What is this doing to my capacity to love? Because there's a problem if being right makes me contemptuous of someone. There's a problem if my political convictions make it impossible for me to see someone on the other side as a human being. There's a problem if my worship preferences make me resent someone who worships differently. The question isn't only, “Am I right?” It's also, “What is being right doing to me?”

Paul doesn't ask us to stop discerning. By all means, name what's wrong. But being right doesn't give us permission to stop loving. We can disagree without contempt. We can pursue justice without pretending we know another person's heart.

Think about what happens around a table. We don't have to eat the same food or agree about everything. We make room. We pass the bread. We listen. We stay at the table. Last Sunday's potluck gave us a glimpse of that. That's the church Paul is describing: not a church where everyone becomes alike, but a church where we learn what matters most.

Christ is at the center. Always. We belong to Christ. And because we belong to Christ, we belong to one another. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. And so are they. Amen.