

September 13, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Romans 14:1–10](#)

TITLE: Substance Over Style

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Earlier this week, we as a church received some sad news in the mail. One of the new members, someone who had started visiting ELPC earlier this year and who joined during our time of COVID-closure, wrote to me and asked to have his name removed from our membership rolls. Churches don't often talk about the times when members leave. Sure, some people move away and find a new church in their new town. Some just stop coming, quietly angry or frustrated about something, until after years go by and they're removed from the rolls. But this young man wrote to me, angry that we had chosen to close the church because of the health directives of Gov. Wolf, believing it was an infringement on the freedom of religion. He was also angry that we have voiced support for Black Lives Matter and even held a vigil around the church in June following the death of George Floyd. This was the first I heard of his displeasure. I wrote back a letter briefly describing how for the health of our staff and congregation it was wise to close the church to the general public; and given the diversity of our congregation plus our commitment to Christian values of justice for all, we choose to speak out on behalf of all people of color and denounce acts of racially-biased police brutality. I don't think he was interested in dialogue, so we'll discuss removing his name at Tuesday's Session meeting per his request.

If a church has doors open to everyone so they may freely enter and grow in their faith as part of a diverse congregation, then the doors need to swing both ways—allowing people to leave if they feel God is leading them to another congregation; or if the seeds we plant here are simply not ready to take root in an individual's heart. ELPC will never be all things to all people. Yes, it is sad when folks leave, especially when it involves those who've been friends and active in the church. We must be willing to look for any truth in criticisms others name, even as we must always be prepared to give a defense of the values we promote. If we do this, we will be a church of substance, not just of style.

Now, before this sermon gets too serious, let me share another anecdote with you, so long as you promise me it will not be the only thing you remember from today's message. True story. Years ago a friend of mine had been dating a woman for a short while when he decided that she was the one for him. So he took her to a nice restaurant and planned to propose to her. He wanted to dress up as a knight in shining armor, but he could only afford to rent the helmet. So he excused himself to go into the restroom where he wrapped himself in aluminum foil, put on the helmet, and returned to their table holding a ring. As he knelt before her, all the shocked young woman could think of was that she was being proposed to by a giant baked potato. She didn't accept his impetuous offer. It was an example of style distracting from substance.

An awkward decision involving aluminum foil led to a failed marriage proposal. A set of strong opinions believing Black Lives Matter is a Marxist organization and churches

shouldn't heed CDC guidelines led to a failed church relationship. But something is involved here that goes deeper than just saying one side is right and one side is wrong. Listen again to Paul's opening words in Romans 14: *Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.* Paul led Christian congregations that included Jewish believers and Gentile converts; people whose whole lives had been spent following dietary laws traced back to Moses and others who had no qualms about eating anything; people of faith who had grown up lighting Sabbath candles on Friday evenings and new followers of Jesus who remembered his resurrection on Easter morning by gathering on Sundays. Paul doesn't jump into the fray and decree which side is right and which is wrong on these issues. He characterizes that as "quarreling over opinions." In many ways, these habits and practices were more about style than substance. Paul argues that there is a deeper question that needs to be asked of all parties: "Are my actions giving honor to God?"

Paul put it this way: *Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike...[Yet whichever day is observed it is done] in honor of the Lord. Likewise, those who eat [certain foods], eat in honor of God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of God. None of us live or die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.* Paul wants us to ask ourselves these questions: "How do my choices, my actions, honor God? Am I looking more for an argument or a discussion? Am I anxious to prove I'm superior to someone who believes differently? Will my behavior shut down all future conversation or still allow for dialogue, possible consensus, or even mutual service?"

Last week I spoke about the art of thinking small—how we are to pay attention to details, to seek to resolve our conflicts one-on-one, and to trust that little acts of kindness go farther than we can imagine. This week I want to pair the art of thinking small with the broader perspective of trusting that the substance of believing in a risen Christ and an active, providential God goes far beyond the superficialities of church styles and denominational practices. The substance of faith contains the bold affirmation "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. Let all that is within me, praise the Lord." Only when that big picture substance is clear and understood can we move on to secondary details like where and when we worship, what hymns we should sing, what foods we should eat, and things like that.

A couple days ago I had the chance to speak to a group of 24 students majoring in social work at the University of Pittsburgh. This group of talented women and men had chosen a vocation so they could make a difference in people's lives who were struggling with issues around sexual violence, substance abuse, and racist, structural inequities in our community. They could teach clients how to apply for government assistance or access needed resources of food, housing, and health care. But I told them that they will only be fully effective in their work if they also find ways to talk about faith and spirituality. No, that doesn't mean they are to grill their clients on whether they are Protestant or Catholic, whether they like "Amazing Grace" or "A Mighty Fortress" better, whether they pray before meals and make pledges to annual stewardship campaigns. It

means instead they find ways to ask questions like, “What gives you hope? What are your dreams for your children? Is life trustworthy and if so, how do you know?” I reminded the social workers-in-training that true change is only possible when you tap into these deeper, substantive questions around motivations and faith—whether they are willing to attend a 12-step meeting that talks about trusting in a higher power, or whether they find the strength to carry on because people beside them in the pew or temple or mosque are praying for them.

Paul got to the heart of the matter: *If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.* The substance of faith insists we are not alone for God is near to us all. The style of faith involves lesser things, like music selections, menu choices, and planning calendars we follow as we live in our own community of faith. Substance over style should always take precedence.

Many of the social workers wrote me short emails to thank me for my presentation and to comment that they hoped to find ways to incorporate a spiritual perspective in their work going forward. My aluminum foil-covered friend did eventually find a companion for his life journey, and he remains one who is the first to laugh about his many youthful foibles. But our disgruntled soon-to-be-former member of ELPC, well, I don’t know what comes next for him. Given the tone of his letter, I don’t think he wants to dialogue about our differences. He seemed quite sure of his beliefs. The wisdom of Paul is very helpful as he reminds us not to pass judgment on our brother or sister. Even though this person chose to exit our church doors, he is still known by God and loved by God and moving about in a world designed, maintained, and redeemed by God.

John 3:16 famously says, *God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* That is true, but the real substance of our faith—the good news for us all comes in the next verse. John 3:17—*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* Christ is active in the world—in our church and outside our walls, in our faith tradition and beyond our doctrines, dogmas, and denominations, in ways we understand and condone and in ways that likely make us uncomfortable or perplexed or simply amazed. Such is the substance of our faith and our greatest comfort. For it is not for us to understand all. It is simply for us to affirm to all, “We are the Lord’s.” Thanks be to God!