

“Varieties of Religious Experience”

Romans 14:5-12

September 2nd, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

The event of birth puts a person in a place in society that greatly determines the kinds of experiences they have in life.¹ Take a six year old boy born into a poor family in one of the industrial regions of England two hundred years ago. He was likely to wake up around five in the morning, rush to the mill to service the clanking mechanical looms until sunset, six days a week. Often, he would die of exhaustion before reaching his teens.

Then there would be a twelve year old girl in the silk-making regions of France, around the same time. She would be sitting next to a tub all day, dipping silkworm cocoons in scalding water to melt the sticky substance that held the threads together. She was likely to succumb to respiratory diseases because she sat in wet clothing from sunrise to sunset, her fingertips eventually losing all feeling from the hot water.



In the meantime, children of the nobility learned to dance the minuet and converse in foreign languages.



The same differences in life-chances are still with us. What can a child born into an urban slum in Los Angeles, Detroit, Cairo, Mexico City or Buffalo’s east side expect to experience during their lives? How does one child’s life differ from the life of a child born into an affluent American suburb or well-to-do Swedish or Swiss family? There isn’t any justice, rhyme or reason in one person being born into a starving community, perhaps with a congenital physical defect, while another starts life with good looks, high intelligence, excellent health and healthcare and a

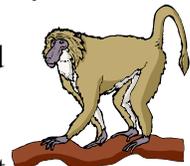
¹ This material on destiny is contained in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Finding Flow, The Psychology Of Engagement With Every Day Life* ISBN 0-465-04513-8. Pages 6-7 and then page 5.

large bank account. So while the main circumstances of life are fixed and no person can avoid working, sleeping and interacting with others, humanity is divided into social categories that *largely* determine the specific content of their life’s experiences. Then there is one’s individuality and personality that makes for changes on the canvas of life.



Consider the fact that baboons, who live in the African plains, spend about one-third of their life sleeping. When they wake up, they divide their

time between traveling, finding and eating food, interacting with or grooming each other’s fur to pick out lice. Not a very exciting life but not much has changed in the



million years since humans got to be where they are today. In some ways, our lives are not that different from the baboons.

Give or take a few hours, most people sleep one-third of the day and use the remainder to work, travel or do sedentary things. An historian noted that in thirteenth century French villages, which were among the most advanced in the world at the time, the most common leisure pursuit was still that of picking lice out of each other’s hair. Now, of course, we have television.

Accordingly, have you noticed that people tend to want simple and easy solutions to problems that come along? A clue to this tendency lies in the titles to articles in the supermarket tabloids and the teasers for TV talk shows.

“Breakthrough in the history of dieting.” “How to keep your marriage partner satisfied.” The reason the “Boomer” generation found years of amusement in the television character “Archie Bunker” was because he echoed, in all of us, our desires to come up with simplistic and quick answers to daily tensions. Unfortunately, if his solutions were carried out in real life, there would

be no politicians, minorities, women in leadership, Communists, people of other races, language groups or people of faith expressions other than a vague unpracticed Protestantism.



Depending on the place of our birth and our social and economic circumstances, we usually take the easy way – the path most traveled – whenever possible. We use shortcuts in our conversations. We use name tags like “conservative,” “liberal” or “moderate.” The actual meanings of these shortcuts are so blurred that they’re almost meaningless and certainly subjective, emotional and judging in nature.



There are many varieties of religious expressions and practices and in our text, Paul was trying to remind these Roman Christians of that fact. In *that* church, there were mostly people who had worshipped the gods and goddesses in the pagan temples or others who were more focused on philosophy and public debates. There were some who had converted from Judaism. In the first four verses of this chapter, Paul mentioned those believers who ate all foods and those who were vegetarians for Christ.²

You see, just as in our time, Christians in the first century culture, struggled with appearances and conformity. Some tried to avoid giving appearances of supporting the pagan religions, refusing to buy or eat meat that had been offered to idols. Others, perhaps more secure in some ways, figured out that morality doesn’t have anything to do with what goes inside you because it’s what comes out of us, as Jesus had taught. These people bought their steak from the temple meat merchants, knowing that the gold-covered stick of wood inside wouldn’t know the difference anyway.

² In order to avoid being considered ‘pagan’ because eating meat from the temple meat market outlet appeared, in their minds, to be supportive of the worship of the gods and goddesses.

Besides the dietary arguments, there were the disagreements about religious holidays. Some, who had been brought up in Judaism, wanted to honor God with strict adherence to feast days, new moons and Sabbath rituals for Saturday. Others, Paul being one of them, thought that everyday is a gift from God and we shouldn’t get too attached to any one set of 24 hours more than another.

There was tension in the midst of these kinds of disputes, in that Roman congregation. Strong personalities were insisting that everyone be religious in the same way. It wasn’t the case that some people were saying that “anything goes” and that “nothing mattered.” It was a clash between people who were very religious and devout but who were judging others for not conforming to their personal tastes in custom, symbol and life-style.

Paul’s advice to these people is to respect another’s right to have a different expression of their Christian faith than your own. Christ died for all people³ and everyone who is a child of God is a servant of God, not one of God’s judges. There isn’t just one way of doing things.

Later, in the next chapter, Paul makes sure that they don’t go in the opposite extreme. He says you shouldn’t be arrogant, not caring at all about what other people think and feel. You should be sensitive to the danger of offending “weaker believers” who are genuinely insecure and may have a simplistic faith consisting of lists of ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts.’ Paul is talking about a balance.



How does this relate to us today?

In my Pennsylvania childhood, there were Mennonites and my friends would ridicule the Mennonite girls for wearing little rounded white nets on their hair. How intolerant it was and it was just as stupid and insecure as kids who make fun of people with glasses, red hair or any other personal article different from a peer group.

If each of us look within, we find pockets of intolerance, if not smoldering distain, toward other Christians who think and act differently from us.

³ Verse 9

“It would be so much *easier* if everyone was like us” we secretly say to ourselves.



Once, some years back, Linda and I were visiting a new church to us and we were sitting in a worship service where they were about to serve communion. The person sitting next to Linda grabbed her hand as did others around us. Just to go along with it, Linda and I held hands.

That was OK, but suddenly I realized that Linda was starting to grip my hand harder and harder (as she was getting a little nervous). Then one of them started to raise his and Linda’s hand upward and, of course, everyone else in the pew did it. So out of nervousness from the increasing strength of the other guy’s grip on her hand, she started to squeeze my hand harder. And then we looked at each other and it was all over – we started to laugh.

Here we were, visitors in some church, rippling with laughter and chained to a row of very earnest worshippers supposedly about to celebrate Holy Communion.



There are numerous expressions of worship, as well as beliefs and emphasis that cause emotional reactions that lead to alienation. I know of one person who absolutely refuses to go forward with everyone else when her Presbyterian church serves communion by intinction.



There’s one thing our Catholic friends know that we haven’t discovered yet but I’ll let you in on it. They know that everyone is a closet pyromaniac. They’ve got those candles for everyone with which to play *each Sunday* and their churches are packed. We should have realized that we are only full on Christmas Eve because that’s the only time we give you candles. So starting next Sunday,⁴



⁴ Second thought, that would be too expensive so I’ll encourage you to bring your own candle if it will get you out to church. But seriously, candles are a calming aid to prayer and meditation so it shouldn’t be mocked.

There *are* different religious expressions, even within the traditions of the Christian Church, simply because we all are running along with different personalities and histories. The way we experience and respond to life not only profoundly affects our relationships with each other, it affects how we conduct ourselves as religious people. So we should remember that even within the narrowness of our own customs and traditions here as Presbyterians, there are differing experiences behind each person here.

Some of us fondly remember being at a religious camp or retreat as a youth. There may have been a significant emotional experience, in that time away from our family of origins, that changed or shaped a start of our spiritual awareness.

Perhaps you may remember another Christian who seemed to care about you, reaching out and taking an interest in you during a troubling time in life. As a result, you saw that caring as a manifestation of God’s presence.

Some here have been wrestling with various world views and have contemplated, in a disciplined way, different outlooks on life and spirituality. Because of your studies, you have come to a thought-out commitment to the Christian world view. You have sensed the profound reality of the presence of God in Christ in your life.

Some of you have found comfort after dealing with death, divorce or tremendous loss in your life or your children’s.

To many, this community is like a larger family of acceptance with opportunities to help make life better or enriched for others. Have you found that opportunity which calls out your abilities and compassion?

I would suspect that there is a part, in all of us that wants to come here and sit beneath the vaulted ceiling, realizing that God is bigger than all of our personal problems. After some weeks, we want to sit back and be swallowed up in the corporate worship of the whole community – drawing on a Strength about which we can not adequately describe.

Some people just feel better for coming to church.

Some are attracted to the meaningful social action projects or the teaching.

There are some, not many in the Presbyterian tradition, but a few who come to church and want to be told what to think – especially if it is what they already think. They feel very uncomfortable when the complexities of an issue are brought up – leaving them to grapple with its implications. That’s why these folks tend to gravitate toward a more authoritarian church tradition, different than ours.

Still others see church as a time of growth in how they can, that week, work specifically on sorting out life’s experiences and somehow gain wisdom of mind and strength of heart.



All these things, and many more, are the real needs and directions of many of us. None of us are the same and we all have different needs and expectations.

So the Christian faith is not just theology or precise doctrinal statements written so that all people would respond and speak in the same way. Rather, it is a string or necklace of different individuals, held together by the love of Christ. It’s an odd and sometimes unpredictable collection of face-to-face relationships of a lot of different personality types.

As fellow travelers, we should be merciful to one another here and elsewhere. Our differences of opinion, in most cases, are not as important as the fact that we ought to just do what we personally believe in order to be authentic to our core and our faith. Being true to ourselves and our convictions, but remembering to be sensitive to others at the same time.

It’s like a marriage. Most of it, as Anna Quindelen says, is about ① trying to be a good friend, ② showing up, ③ trying to listen and certainly ④ trying to laugh.⁵

There is a lot of unity here between us and others in other churches. We focus on the

⁵ See Anna Quindelen’s *A Short Guide to a Happy Life* page 15. ISBN: 0-37550-4613 or Adobe Acrobat online ebook: ISBN: 1589456831.

differences too often but in reality, we are all trying just as hard at doing most of the same kind of ministries. But our *attitudes*, more so than our *differences*, usually alienate us.

“Get a life in which you are not alone, . . . because without awareness of our mortality, we will continue to waste our lives in the pursuit of things that are, simply, not so important. Life is made up of moments, small pieces of glittering mica in a long stretch of gray cement.”⁶ What a shame it would be to miss millions of those moments.

If we loosen up and not insist that other believers do things exactly the same as us, we will discover and appreciate differences in other people. If we’re open, we’ll learn from our differences.

Are we signed up for class – to live in each moment – trying to learn from everyone and every experience? Are we truly here, . . . caring, . . . and being open to whatever unfolds?

Let’s face it. Our partners and friends would feel we’d be more fun to live with. More importantly, if we go through life with an openness to diversity, particularly in the family of those who reverence God, we discover more about the nature of God.

Try going to other churches occasionally and be broadened and informed by their differences. We’ll see more of God’s creativity and personality by seeing how God keeps working in wider circles than just our own. Do you know how God has and is moving in this community? Are you part of it?



Seek God out, . . . pursue God. As we started out discussing, you were not born into the poverty of 19th century England or France. Nor were you raised in the despair of the urban ghetto. You have had more resources placed in your hands than 90% of the rest of the world. You and I have no excuse not to use the educational resources we were given.

⁶ Anna Quindelen, already cited, page 20.



Read the books you have freedom to read and the economic means to purchase. Join the study groups that intentionally focus on in-depth subjects. If you're not growing in your understanding of yourself, others and God in your experiences here – try something else but try some thing. It's your responsibility not to squander the educational resources to which some people will *never* have access.

Each of us seek to gather and use the tools and means to reconnect the fragmented parts of ourselves – so we can experience our spiritual unfolding and well being through our mindfulness of God's actual presence in our lives. Pause to appreciate our diversity because in it, you're seeing the personality of God. God works in wider circles than we'll ever dream. God moves in mysterious ways. Stay open for more of the mystery of God in your life. 🌱

