

Got some really profound, extremely thought-provoking things to say today! One of my best sermon opening lines, ever! Are you ready? We all have at least 2 families: one biological, the other this church family. Might also have friends and co-workers that feel like family, too. Today Paul writes to the Romans and to us as family- God’s family. Another really profound, thought provoking thing I wanna say! Everybody’s God’s family. EVERY BODY! And, families don’t always get along. SHOCKING! Families don’t always agree. NOT agreeing used to be OK! Not agreeing never used to be an instantaneous relationship breaker, especially with family. Used to be we just agreed to disagree AND loved family anyway! Not so much anymore! Why are we letting our differences divide us so? Ever wonder what God thinks about about our earthly family? Ever notice how short, abrupt, cranky, negative, isolated and private we’ve become? Can you talk politics in your family? How about religion? Without getting into an argument? Here’s the issue: we may all be family but that’s where our similarities end. The website ReligiousTolerance.org reports that in North America alone there are more than 1500 different Christian faith groups. Doesn’t even include all the other religions in North America. The largest denominations start with the Catholic faith. United Methodist is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest followed by Presbyterian, Evangelical Lutheran, Episcopal, Baptist and the United Church of Christ. Are we ALL REALLY that different? There really is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism! Paul said it; some eat meat and some don’t. Some observe particular festivals; others don’t. Some wear special clothes; some don’t. Some act one way; others don’t! Some are part of a church; others aren’t. So, here’s the next really profound, extremely thought- provoking thing I wanna say. In their Psychological Science article “First Impressions,” Princeton psychologists determined we take a 10<sup>th</sup> of a second to form a first impression of a person’s face. Longer exposures don’t alter our 1<sup>st</sup> impressions. Like it or not, we’re quick to judge. Those instantaneous judgments play a powerful role in how we treat others, and how we get treated. Psychologists proved long ago attractive people get better outcomes in almost every job. People with “mature” faces are judged more severely than “baby-faced” people. And, having a competent face (as opposed to a trustworthy or likeable face) matters if we want to get elected. In a 10<sup>th</sup> of a second!

We ARE all different but nowadays our differences cause judgments and disagreements that hurt, even sever relationships. Why have we become so intolerant? And, I wonder? By insisting everyone agrees with our beliefs and looks competent; are we making ourselves the judge? Are we making ourselves the judge when we say our way’s right and ANY other way’s wrong? The Bible has a name for that behavior. It’s called self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is this “confidence in ourselves that’s smugly, moralistically does not tolerate others’ opinions, beliefs and behaviors.” Biblically speaking, self-righteousness is the idea that we can somehow generate a God-acceptable righteousness! Paul said it to the Romans just like he says it to us: earlier in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter. As it is written: “there is no one righteous, not even one.” Self-righteousness is a form of legalism. Self-righteousness puts the law above the Good News Gospel by establishing extra requirements of believing beyond repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Legalism reduces the Bible’s broad, inclusive God who created us all to a narrow, rigid moral code. The truth of this matter is: we all sin. We all fall short of the glory of God.

Our sin severs relationships with God and with each other. It’s why Jesus and Paul came down really hard on the self-righteous, those who believe they are without sin or sin less severely or absolutely know what is right. Ever been judged? Someone decided they were right and you were wrong? Ever been excluded? Judged “too” something? Too male or too female? Too fat or too uncoordinated, too smart or too not smart enough? Too inexperienced or too old? Too tall, too white, too black, too Hispanic, too rightly conservative or too leftly liberal? Too, too, too! How’s that feel? To be excluded? Out of the family. Judged unacceptable or unworthy? It happen to me in my second church before I even got there. I called the Worship Committee chair to tell her I was excited to begin our ministry. Said, I looked forward to working together. Her response: “we’ll see about that!” And, she did. She did everything she could to work against me, including mocking me in the narthex before worship. You see, she’d already judged me unfit to be her pastor. She didn’t want a woman pastor. To her, I was not part of that family! I can tell you it’s especially painful when people as close as family decide to be our judge. It’s why Paul takes the opportunity to write about our Christian differences. Paul didn’t need DNA testing to confirm each of us is unique and uniquely created by God! So, is Paul gonna give us a miracle working formula that’ll bring us all together and settle our differences? Does Paul have THE secret? Paul knows people are VERY peopley! We are not God. We see differences Jesus just doesn’t see. Anyone who’s ever been in a committed relationship or has a sibling knows agreeing on everything’s hard. Ever notice how siblings have the same parents but that’s where their similarities end? Same backgrounds, same experiences, same genetics combine to make different people! Different is God’s plan! Family: sometimes we can’t live with ‘em but we also can’t live without ‘em!

Difficult differences are why Paul wrote to the church in Rome and to us who are not so united, United Methodists. They were at odds with one another and so are we. I think that’s why I like Paul. Paul’s ALL about RESPECT and so am I! All I’m asking for is a little respect. Respect me. Respect everyone even if we look and believe differently. Paul respects that no two people are alike. Paul respects that no two people have exactly the same ideas even in families, even among other religions. In Rome then, in our country and in our denomination now; our differences have gone way beyond difficult to the point where people are judging one another’s sin! And, yet Jesus said “you who are without sin cast the 1<sup>st</sup> stone.” Should any of us be picking up a stone? Isn’t that what’s happening? I see lots of stones being thrown. We’re aiming at those who are different but sadly we just don’t see it when we believe we’re right! Today, Paul’s up front and confronts all that! He’s calling out the self-righteous factions they’ve formed! He’s concerned about how each group’s making its own beliefs the only TRUE measure of faith. My friends, there’s nothing new about any of it! We just don’t like to hear it. We tdon’t like to get called out for it, either. We also have a hard time talking about our differences. Dealing with our differences has been a problem in faith communities ever since the world began! Differences are as old as Old Testament brothers, Cain and Abel. How else can we explain all the different denominations and non-denominational churches? My friends, a divisively GIANT schism is happening in the United Methodist Church right now over human sexuality. And, right now I want you to hear me asking you to wait in the anxious tension for direction on our way forward. Everybody has their own ideas about what it means to be a true

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Christian! Each faction is saying: “you’re a Christian if you vote like we do, look like we do, think like we do, behave and believe like we do.” What about the Jesus way? The Bible asks us to be concerned about how we enter God’s kingdom. It’s a narrow door! That’s not to say we’re to be narrowed minded! An argument broke out at Ladies Homemaker’s extension meeting. They argued over pie crust. Some women said; “use lard,” others said; “no, margarine.” Others said “Crisco.” Another group argued; “oil makes the best crust.” The debate got so hot; it not only disrupted their bake sale plans; it ruined their relationships. It’s easy to let our differences divide and entangle us in disagreement! And, why is that? Is it hard for us to accept other’s ideas? Is our self-esteem suffering? Are we so insecure things have to go our way? Maybe we’ve lived too long with all the anger and resentment and it’s rubbing off. Or, is it that life feels so out of control we grab onto and control what we think we have control over? Who’s to judge? Wouldn’t the world be a better place if we just let God be God? God is our only judge! If you’ve ever been judged by someone; you know how awful it feels. Such self-righteous judging threatens God’s kingdom community of love and grace. Judgment has no place in any Christian faith community. The church is NOT a like-minded social club with a uniform dress code and a rigid set of behaviors for all its members. Nor do we determine the standards of another’s behavior. It’s not ours to decide who measures up to our human standards and who doesn’t! Paul’s crystal clear: God welcomes both the weak and the strong. Romans chapter 3 of Eugene Peterson’s Message Bible describes Paul’s idea in plain English. “Since we’ve compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us.

Out of sheer generosity God put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, it’s *now*—this is current history! God sets things right. God also makes it possible for us to live in God’s rightness. So where does that leave our proud Jewish insider claims and counterclaims? Canceled? Yes, canceled. What we’ve learned is this: God does not respond to what *we* do; we respond to what *God* does. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting God set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade. God is the God of outsider non-Jews as well as insider Jews. God sets right all who welcome his action and enter into it, both those who follow our religious system and those who have never heard of our religion.” My friends, God’s our only judge. So, how do we recognize when we might be judging?

We can recognize we’re judging others when we expect our way be THE only way; when we’re not willing or open to others ideas. We can recognize we’re judging others when we talk in terms of us and them. We can recognize we’re judging others when what we say about others feels good but it doesn’t feel right. We can recognize we’re judging others when we’re worried about who hears us and who doesn’t. We can recognize we’re judging others when we gossip about others in unkind ways! We can recognize we’re judging others when we assume we’re right without trying to understand or even know other’s thoughts and experiences. We don’t know anyone’s past and if we did maybe God’s changed their heart or maybe God hopes to use

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their experiences to change our hearts! We don’t know the burdens anyone carries. We can’t assume we know another’s heart or intentions but God does. Only God can! I wanna tell you Bev’s story. Bev lived in a small town her entire life. Growing up, everyone knew Bev’s family was a hot, dysfunctional mess. Her dad was a mean alcoholic who didn’t work consistently. Let’s just say her mom was known to step outside their marriage. Bev never had the latest ANYTHING. Her classmates made fun of her for that. Sometimes Bev went to school with no supper the night before or a morning’s breakfast. With very little love and support, Bev managed to graduate High School. She got a job and moved out. Everyone in the community knew Bev was turning out to be like her promiscuous mom. Until she met Bob. Bob was a stabilizing force in Bev’s life. Bob and Bev got married, settled down and had a family. Bob insisted they go to church. They’d been members their entire married lives. I came into their lives well after their kids had grown and had kids on their own. In fact, I married Bob and Bev’s granddaughter. Because of Bev’s past, I could she was looked down on in the church. It was all very subtle. Bev was NEVER asked to serve. People walked away when Bev came into a group. She was always interrupted, always talked over her. Bev knew it and it hurt her. Always wondered why she stayed? The pain of her past lead her to accept Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She’d tell you “if Jesus forgives and frees a sinner like me with a past like mine; Jesus’ll forgive anyone.” Bev was quick to forgive and quick to give God the credit for bringing Bob into her life. She saw Bob as who God used to give her life a fresh start. Guess who I asked to serve on a church committee? It was really hard at first. The truth is: the church people judged Bev as less than, as unworthy, as someone who wasn’t fit to serve or have a voice in the church. Bev was used to being judged. She saw through it, forgave; but, it still hurt. Took a whole lotta prayer, love, advocacy and support for the church people to see the real Bev. They’d judged her by her past; but, they really didn’t know her. Once they knew her story they were inspired by her courage, strength and faith. Don’t we all have a story? My friends, we’re not the judge of anyone. And, this church is not our church it’s God’s church. God sees us all as family! Family’s God’s generous gift. God only and ever wants us to be a part of bringing God’s kingdom love to earth as it is in heaven, growing the family in God’s love. We usher heaven to earth whenever we love unconditionally and offer grace unending to EVERY ONE. Offering everyone what God freely offers us. GRACE unending. THERE’S NOTHING WE CAN DO TO EARN GOD’S GRACE! Just believe. Even our believing is God’s gift! It’s why Paul asked the church in Rome and he asks us; who’s to judge? God’s our only judge; and I’m just putting this out here right now; God doesn’t need our assistance. God is in control. Paul gives us reasons why we can know this. First, we’re God’s servants. We serve God’s church. The church is not our church. God’s in charge not us! And, since the God who created us has called every one of us to this service; we’re to respect one another as God’s beloved. Every human is created in God’s image, male/female/transgendered gay or straight. God loves us all so we ought to love one another. God respects us all so we ought to respect one another! I’m not asking us to like EVERY other’s opinions or beliefs! We ARE ALL different; but God calls us to love our neighbors. The way I understand God’s definition of neighbor is: everyone’s a neighbor, part of God’s family!

Secondly, all we do; we do to honor and glorify God, not ourselves. Jesus came to serve

not to be served. Our only goal: honor God in all we THINK, say and do! And, on that final judgment day; we WILL all face God’s judgment. Only Jesus can save us from but along with God’s free gift of that salvation comes responsibility; the responsibility to follow Jesus. God’s the judge. Are we uncomfortable yet? I want to go on record as saying this; I’m willing to stand before God on the judgment day for my actions and beliefs. When God asks me if I tried my best to love EVERYONE and INCLUDE EVERYONE, I want to be able to say yes! I want to be able to say I excluded no one by expecting my way be the only right way. Fear not my friends, the good news is: God’s judgment will NEVER deem us unworthy of being saved! Our God is a God of Love and a God of Grace. For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son! All we have to do is believe in him! We won’t perish! We’ll have eternal life. We love John 3:16 but in light of this message; I want you to hear John 3: 17. John 3:17 goes on to say God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned! Period! NO BELIEVER IS CONDEMNED! NO BELIEVER IS EXCLUDED. It doesn’t say every believer who believes exactly what I believe is saved and NOT condemned. Let’s NEVER forget God’s the judge! Let’s avoid judging, avoid creating this false hierarchy; avoid setting any one group above another. That’s not of God. That’s idol worship. Setting one group to be the respected, the emulated, and in charge is idol worship! We set no standards. God does.

Thanks be to God for God’s love, the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who loves us even when we’re undeserving! My friends, we are all different but here’s something we all have in common! We all stand in need of God’s grace every minute of every hour of every day, every day of every year of our lives until we die! May we NEVER forget the truth Paul proclaims! Jesus is our Lord, and while we were still weak he died for the ungodly. God, send us your grace for our ANY ungodly way! BRING US TO OUR KNEES. Humble our hearts. Helps us hear your good news! No matter our past, no matter our beliefs, no matter, no matter! God loves you. My friends, God’s grace is sufficient for everyone no matter! And, here at Ottawa First United Methodist Church, everyone’s family, God’s family.