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Season of Creation  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
September 7, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18: 21-35

Sometimes, sentences in the Bible, when taken out of context can be a bit ... well ... strange. I love the zinger from Romans that we just read.

[image: the weak eat only vegetables]

“The weak eat only vegetables”. And some people say the Bible is hard to understand. That line seems about as sensible as the mis-quote from the sermon on the mount. Jesus says, “blessed are the peacemakers”.

[image: blessed are the cheesemakers]

But people who are a bit too far away to hear properly hear, “blessed are the cheesemakers”. “The weak eat only vegetables.” Now you might try to make sense out of this, and ask yourself if the people are weak because they only eat vegetables, or if they only eat vegetables because they are already weak. There must be some logic - or perhaps even some nutritional advice embedded in this text. Well - good luck with that! Because I believe this is the sort of passage where the words themselves mean almost nothing to our modern ears, but the context for the passage actually speaks volumes to us.

Don’t worry - I’m not going to talk about veganism today. But just for the record, you can be very strong as a vegan. Here’s a vegan bodybuilder.

[image: vegan bodybuilder]

[image: the weak eat only vegetables]

Believe it or not, I think that the complete passage from Romans makes a great deal of sense. Today. We just need to remember a bit of history. In particular, we need to remember that the book of Romans describes the situation of an early christian community. And that community was made up of people from a number of different backgrounds. People came into the early Christian community with their own traditions, their own ideas of what “religion” looked like. Their own ideas of what “holy” meant. Their own ideas of what foods they should - or should not eat.

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Many early Christian communities were embroiled in how to decide who was an insider and who was an outsider. Remember that the early church adapted out of a sect within Judaism. So, some of the church members believed that all Christians should follow Jewish rituals. Many others did not. Many of the new Christians were from backgrounds that today we would call “Pagan” and those people brought all sorts of new rituals and traditions into Christianity - many of which we still respect today.

For example, think of halos. Haloes are not featured in the Bible or in Jewish tradition. Haloes are from Roman culture. Haloes are originally from Iran actually.

[image: helios]

Hundreds of years before Jesus, Romans used rays, or a circular nimbus around the head of Helios, the sun god. Here is one depiction of Helios. Helios is often depicted on a chariot. The chariot that brings the sun across the sky each day.

[image: Christo sol invictus]

And here is a 3rd century depiction of Jesus called “Christo Sol Invictus” using the same type of halo. And even the chariot. This mosaic is located in St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican.

[image: sol invictus]

Actually, the connection between Helios and Jesus goes farther than that. Helios, the sun god, was known as “Sol Invictus”. Or, the “Unconquered Sun”. Jesus is - of course - the “Unconquered Son”. The date of December 25 was chosen for the birth of Jesus because December 25 was already the day of the Roman festival of Sol Invictus. Helios was described as bringing light and life to the world. Jesus is of course described in the exact same way.

[image: syncretic]

Christianity is called a “syncretic” religion because it was woven together from threads from many different cultural and religious traditions. A wonderful example of that is how Christmas Trees were originally a pagan symbol. But today, they are fully accepted - in North America at least - as Christian symbols. Nobody ever asks if Fir trees grew in Palestine in Jesus’s day (They did not!). What today we call Christmas trees come from German pagan traditions designed to celebrate resilience during long, cold,

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dark northern European winters.

[image: the weak eat only vegetables]

And so the Apostle Paul speaks directly to this in our story. Because Christians in his congregation had been criticizing each other for eating meat, or for refusing to eat meat. Christians in his congregation had been criticizing each other for observing certain days, or for not observing certain days. And Paul says ... relax. We can all get along. St Paul says that the Christian community can get along even if we do not agree on all of our rituals and traditions. Perhaps more importantly, St Paul says we should not be judging each other anyway.

St Paul is even more blunt than I am - declaring that those who only eat vegetables are weak. What he means is that the people who stick with their old traditions (like the tradition that one should not eat meat), people who prefer rules, people who like to control other people - are weak in spirit. Because people who are strong in the spirit are flexible. People who are strong in spirit do not insist on getting their own way. They appreciate the gift of the other in their presence - people with different traditions, ideas, and values. Strong people can eat anything they like. Whereas the weak only eat vegetables.

The phrase “The weak eat only vegetables” is not about vegetables. It is not even about food. It is all about relationships, and respecting people who bring their own ideas to the table. Paul is telling us to respect each other in spite of our differences. Telling us not to be judgmental.

St Paul wanted the early church to grow and he knew that is only possible when everyone is embraced as equals. A Church is only a church when everyone is welcomed and allowed to feel like they belong. And that is just as true today as it was in the days of the early church.

[sarcasm flag]

But even if you agree with that - how far should we push that idea? Are we really expected to put up with people who do not think like we do? Seriously, if we push acceptance of other people that far, those different people might even join our church. If we push acceptance of other people that far, we might even end up learning from each

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other. If we push acceptance of other people that far, we might even end up moving past some of the resentments that are holding us back. We might even end up - in some cases - forgiving each other.

Which brings us to our reading from Matthew, which is all about forgiveness. Specifically, expensive forgiveness. Particularly since this week is the 24th anniversary of the events we call “9/11”. What better time to discuss expensive forgiveness. What better time to consider whether or not we have forgiven at all.

[image: twin towers]

Today, we are reminded of many actions that we might choose to forgive. The obvious actions that we might choose to forgive are the actual attacks that happened 24 years ago this week. The attacks aimed at the White House, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Centre. Approximately 3,000 people died that day. And others - including rescue workers - died afterwards.

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness. The anniversary of 9/11 not only brings to mind the events of that single day 24 years ago. We are also mindful of what has happened as a response to that day.

[image: invasion of Afghanistan]

The military response to 9/11 included the invasion of two countries - Afghanistan and Iraq. These invasions were primarily led by the United States, but Canada and other countries participated. And those two invasions have led to a staggering loss of civilian life. Estimates of the civilian dead in Iraq due to the invasion range up to approximately 1 million. But even conservative estimates of the number of dead civilians in Iraq caused by our collective military invasion is over 100,000 people. Can we forgive ourselves for that?

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness.

[image: no islamophobia]

Can we forgive our media for whipping us into an emotional frenzy, for systematically attempting to brainwash us into hating all Muslims - that’s 25% of the population of our planet - because of the very particular and warped view of 9/11 that the media has given us? Can we forgive ourselves for following along like sheep - unwilling

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to think for ourselves?

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness.

[image: malnutrition]

Can we forgive ourselves for falling into collective paranoia about terrorism. Terrorism is bad of course. In 2019, about 20,000 people died from terrorism. But why have we lost sight of the fact that every single day, 25,000 people die globally due to malnutrition? This is primarily caused by: economic inequality, military conflict, climate change, and greed. Meanwhile, we spend vast resources on our military and “security” infrastructure? The last cost estimate I heard of the military response to 9/11 was \$8 Trillion. Would terrorists get any traction at all if we had spent \$8 Trillion constructively around the world in places that needed some help? Can we forgive ourselves for arming ourselves instead of feeding and healing the world?

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness.

[image: bigotry - palestine]

Can we forgive ourselves for all of the above, which I believe laid the ground work required to create the socially toxic reality where a state like Israel can commit a genocide and we in the west provide weapons and political cover for the oppressors?

Can we forgive ourselves for forgetting that “never again” means “never again for anyone” as we watch a holocaust unfold before our eyes, live streamed to the world

Does all this sound like very expensive forgiveness to you? The word “expensive” does not even come close. And yet, the words of Jesus ring in our ears. We must forgive. That means forgiving others. And forgiving ourselves. Wow.

[image: Brampton, Brantford, East York, Hastings, Grand Bend, Markham, Newmarket, Toronto, Whitby]

And closer to home - I'm sure that each of us can think of a situation in our own lives that cries out for forgiveness. Think back over the last week or so. Was there a person that you just wanted to strangle? Was there a person you ignored on the street because of unresolved issues in your own heart? Was there a person who you pretended was not there? Was there a person who you decided was less human than you? Think of an unhealthy relationship in your own life and think about whether forgiveness is what

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needs to come - right now - for that relationship to move forward in a more healthy direction.

[image: forgiveness quote]

Remember - forgiveness does not mean that the hurt never happened. Forgiveness does not mean that you have to pretend to be friends again. Forgiveness does not mean that you must now pretend to trust someone who is not trustworthy.

Forgiveness means that you have decided to move forward in your own life, and have decided to stop waiting for someone else to do something first. The person in question may in fact owe you something. But forgiveness means that moving forward with your own life is more important to you than waiting for that debt to be repaid. Forgiveness means your own life is more important to you than your need to “fix” the other person. Forgiveness means that new life in the present is more important to you than living in the past.

[image: creation]

That very long preamble finally leads us to the advertised topic of the week. Because this is also the Season of Creation. And when we think of what is happening on our world, when we listen to the groaning of creation, when we feel the impacts of climate change ... it is often very tempting to ... well, what exactly are we tempted to do when we think about climate change? Or more specifically, what do we do when we think about the climate crisis we are facing?

Hands down, the most common reaction after we reflect on the climate crisis is to forget all about it. We simply decide that we are too small, too powerless to make any real difference anyway. That is definitely the preferred option for most people most of the time.

Another response that comes from many sources - including many United Church of Canada materials - is to feel guilt. That guilt may or may not be accompanied by any actual action. But some people choose to take on a great deal of guilt as their response to the climate crisis.

Another response that is becoming more common, particularly amongst younger people, is to despair. To give up hope. To give up period. This is a serious condition

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known as “climate anxiety”. And it can be very debilitating.

[image: practicing peace with creation]

Another response is to learn some simple, doable, practical things that we can do to actually help. The session on Sept 10 @ 6 pm “Practicing Peace with Creation” is designed to do exactly that.

Today, I propose a different response to the climate crisis. Which is ... forgiveness.

[image: forgiving ourselves]

We must acknowledge the role that humans have played in creating the climate crisis. This acknowledgement - along with actual change - can be a form of self-forgiveness.

[image: forgive others]

The climate crisis involves many players including governments, corporations, and consumers. We can choose to forgive groups that we believe have acted too slowly - particularly when there are positive indications of change present which we should celebrate.

[image: interconnectedness and compassion]

We need to recognize the interconnectedness of all life on earth and create true compassion and empathy.

[image: restorative justice]

We can apply the principles of restorative justice to environmental issues. This requires focusing on repairing damage and building relationships, and not just punitive measures.

[image: reconciliation]

Conflicts have arisen between the peoples of the world due to environmental issues. Forgiveness may ultimately lead us to reconciliation as the human race as we work to heal social rifts.

None of these - by themselves - will undo our climate crisis. But the path to environmental healing is a long path, and these attitudes could help us create the mindset that we need in order to make real progress right now.

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I wanted to end with a hopeful message. I was going to write something inspiring, but someone far more famous than me has already done it. So I will just share their wisdom.

[image: David Suzuki]

David Suzuki is a well-known environmentalist and the longtime host of “The Nature of Things”. For decades he has tried to push our governments to implement environmental reforms. But about 2 months ago he released a different type of statement.

Suzuki admitted that “we have lost”. “We have failed to shift the narrative.”<sup>1</sup> But he unpacked that to mean that telling our government to change is a failed project. Because they are not listening to us. They are listening to money and special interest groups.

Instead, Suzuki suggests that we focus on our local communities. That means understanding things like which of our neighbours need some help and then reaching out. And we can all do that. And together, we can discuss how bring that idea to life.

[image: forgiveness quote]

Forgiveness is not about fixing the past. Forgiveness is about how we choose to live in the present. And when we live in the present, that is where we will find our healing.

Oh - just one more thing. Eat your vegetables!

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ipolitics.ca/2025/07/02/its-too-late-david-suzuki-says-the-fight-against-climate-change-is-lost/>