A basic rule in life is when you have to call the police to settle a matter, the ties of affection and trust that bind us together have broken down. In other words, you don’t call the police on the neighbors because you think they are wonderful and well-intentioned people. And if you think about in a society there are actually two sets of laws that govern our behavior. There are the public laws made by government which deal with things that are, by their very nature, indicators of societal breakdown – things like murder, arson and Brad Pitt movies. And then there are the private laws that, if properly instituted, prevent us from ever getting to the laws of government – these are things like being polite, acting charitably and brushing your teeth regularly. In a well-functioning society, the rules of the government are much less restrictive than the private laws. Think of it like this: The government will make laws for the speed you can drive in your car, while the Amish will make rules about whether you can actually drive a car. These private laws are meant to perpetuate certain behaviors that are valued by smaller groups within a larger society. There is nothing in the law that says my children should eat their broccoli, but as parents we value our children’s health, so we insist on them eating their broccoli. And since the private laws are the more restrictive, those laws tend to supersede the public laws An Amish kid can argue that there is no law against them driving to which I assume the Amish parents response would be sure, but if you want to be Amish you can’t drive a car. The laws of the church and many other institutions say something that is more restrictive than the government. And in many ways, this is the framework we find ourselves in today in the Epistle. It is not a debate about government law versus church law but rather about which law in the church is the most important. That is, to which law do we owe more fealty? Let’s start with what Paul says. He states, “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.”

Let’s take a moment for a quick review of what is going on. Paul is telling those at the church in Rome to welcome those who are weak in faith. What exactly he means by weak we are not told, but we can conjecture that these individuals are either new to the faith or have had some event in their life which has brought their faith into question. He then makes sort of a strange turn by saying that you are to welcome them but not so you can get into arguments with them over small matters concerning dietary laws. Rather, you are to welcome them so you can uphold them in their faith. In other words, if your views over what you should eat get in the way of you welcoming a fellow Christian and working to strengthen their faith, you are giving priority to the wrong law. You are allowing a smaller law to block a more important one, namely that we are to love one another. It’s the same idea that Paul addresses in 1st Corinthians when he says, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Meaning that we can be right about all sorts of things when it comes to God’s laws and God’s kingdom but if we forget to first love one another it will not matter. Going back to my original example, which I realize does not quite work, but it kind of does. It would be like the Amish kid who follows all the rules of the road but forgets that he is not supposed drive in the first place. In following the public laws, they have ceased to be Amish. If we remember all the rules and regulations of Christianity but do not love and build one another up we have ceased being Christian.

And in many ways, this is the most difficult thing to pull off in this life. We have to understand and navigate life in a way that both adheres to the God’s law while never forgetting that the rule that trumps all others is that we are to love one another. I am by no means against God’s commands, but God’s commands without love can become a way for us to push someone to the margins and out of our life. And of course, loving does not mean that we excuse inappropriate behavior but rather that we come alongside the person and help them to grow beyond behavior that is destructive and wrong.

If we go back to what Paul was saying he did not say that arguments over what to eat and what not to eat were stupid and should never be had, rather he was first concerned with those whose faith was weak. For he realized that in order to work on their weak faith those individuals needed to be within a faith community, not pushed away or ostracized. Have you ever noticed the inherent problem with ostracizing someone of whose beliefs or actions we disapprove? Assuming that we are right and they are wrong, which is a fairly big assumption, the issue is how can we work on changing their beliefs if we are not around them? I mean if you want your car fixed you take it to your mechanic’s garage you don’t leave it in a random ditch outside Ixonia. You take it to the mechanic because the mechanic cannot fix the problem if they are not in the physical presence of the actual vehicle. So then how do we feel we can help someone with their problems if we refuse to be in the same place as them?

My kids and I used to play this ridiculous game where we would try to come up with a convoluted scenario in which whatever we were doing harmed us and then for a punchline we would say, “That’ll show them.” So, for example we would say we should go to a restaurant, order a bunch of food, pay for it and then leave without eating -- that’ll show them. Showing them seems to be our instinct. We will ostracize someone for their actions or opinions and then somehow think we have solved the problem. We forget the old adage that the Church is not a museum of saints but is rather a hospital for sinners. We are to come together warts and all and help each other to grow in our faith and love for God.

In life we are certainly going to have disagreements with others but we cannot forget that those disagreements are secondary to Christ’s call to love one another. In a world that is ever vigilant to find ways to separate, our call as Christians is the opposite. We are to begin from a place of unity, knowing that we all fall short of the glory of God but that we are to love one another as Christ loves us this day and forevermore.