Imagine a large house in the city of Rome in the First Century: people gathered all in the great room. Beginning late on Saturday evening, after some prayers, they hold a potluck feast during which the people eat and drink freely while readings are read and a leader facilitates a kind of symposium conversation about matters of faith; then, as all are filled in body and spirit and day breaks, bread and wine is taken, blessing prayers said to God, and the Eucharist is shared among the gathered.

That is most likely the earliest pattern of Christian liturgy: it’s what we hear about in the New Testament— and we know that it was almost certainly an all-night affair! Think of poor Eutychus who, in Acts 20, falls asleep while Paul is rattling on and on, falls backward out the window. We think it’s rough when the service runs an hour-and-ten!

Of course, problems crept in very early. By the time Paul writes his letters, in some places the socially prominent would expect, as they would in any circumstance, to serve themselves first, and by the time the lowly came through, well, barely scraps were left. Some got full and drunk while others left hungry and sober. In other places, the folks organizing the meal had no concern for the dietary needs of the others. The message was: it doesn’t matter if you’re a vegetarian or keep kosher: if you’re going to eat with us, you’d better be ready to eat what we’re all eating. It’s family style! And what does it matter if it’s a day of fasting? Ash Wednesday or a Friday in Lent? - who cares! Here we eat red meat and chocolate. So those with special needs were forced either to pick at what little they could eat, or to go hungry, or worse, eat what they thought they shouldn’t or couldn’t, in order to fit in.

The prominent and the planners would get all judgy and say, effectively: what’s with these people? don’t they want to eat? the Gospel frees us from all of those old superstitious rules! We can eat what we want, whenever we want! We’re free in Christ! And so should everyone be.

And that’s where Paul enters here in one of the most poignant sections of instruction in the Letter to the Romans: not so much esoteric theology as before but Christian ethics. He says, basically Good for you, you’re all free and spiritual and enlightened, and eat what you want when you want, and you think you’re super strong! Great - but if your exercise of Christian freedom means either the exclusion of your “weak” (what one commentator translates as vulnerable) sisters and brothers in Christ, or that they go against their own better judgment to be accepted by you, you have, in fact, missed the entire point of the kingdom.

1 Called an Agape Meal or Love Feast: http://earlychurch.com/LoveFeast.html and http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01200b.htm
2 Acts 20:7-12
“We who are strong ought… not to please ourselves” Paul writes a few verses later, continuing “Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself…”

You’ll notice here that it’s the strong - those who find themselves in greater heights and depths of security in God’s love and trust in God’s freedom - whom Paul calls upon to empathetically accommodate the vulnerable weak. And that’s where the strong had gone wrong - because they thought they were the more faithful, the more Christian, they expected others to act like them. What they misunderstood was that the gifts of freedom and trust, the gifts of faith showered upon them were given for building up of the Body of Christ, because whatever gifts we have are not ours - they are God’s, given to us.

What we do as Christians, we do together, because whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. *We are the Lord’s!* And as the Lord’s we are called, in imitation of Christ, to bear with one another, the strong making a place for the weak, knowing that in its time, God will bring us all together to God’s fullness.

Where you are strong today, may you lend your strength to those who are weakest around you: where you are struggling, may you find yourself shored-up by the love and care of this community.

**Other works consulted**


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3 Romans 15:1-3
4 Romans 14:8
of the capacity to produce intended effects and the ability to influence the behavior of others - if your exercise of power

Focus: For some us the powerless are nearer than farther;
Function: Be like Jesus who gives away his power to the powerless.
Question: The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about spreading the power around.
Human Condition: The desire for dominance, power, and status.

Article
Power-Powerlessness
Exegesis of Romans
The locus of our identity is outside ourselves

The scene

Danger is when we are unaware of our power.

“Power … is the capacity to produce intended effects, and in particular, the ability to influence the behavior of another person.” That is the summary definition of decades of scholarly debate given by professors in an article on “dominance and power in human relationships.”

The capacity to make what you want happen and the ability to influence someone else’s behavior. Power.

The article on dominance and power in human relationships speaks to the ways that our interactions with others often take place across a gradient of power: we speak to our manager or employer - who has the power? The police officer and the citizen, the general and the lieutenant, the bishop and the lay person: and even more than in those obvious, big gradients of power, the more subtle forms, often congregated
around age and gender, attractiveness, height and build; a firm handshake, a certain accent, a last name - we use certain markers to indicate our power: types of cars and clothes, houses, locales…

And don’t mistake me here - power in and of itself isn’t bad - it is, like many qualities, how it is discharged that makes it ethical or unethical.