

Love God

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

This sermon might have been called “how to have a church fight or disagreement.” We live in a culture that loves sports and politics. This causes us to define teams, groups and people as winners or losers.

Very few modern sermons deal with eating meat sacrificed to idols, but the text, it turns out, is about much more than that! The occasion for Paul's comment was that the Corinthian church had a strong group of well-educated, well-to-do, relatively sophisticated members who believed that Christians should be free to eat meat offered to idols. The reason is very simple. Idols do not exist and, therefore, have no power, since there is no God but one, as proclaimed in the Shema of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one" from Deuteronomy 6:4. And even if there were gods (with a little “g” or demons) they are subordinate to the "one God." For “strong Christians,” there is only “one God” was obvious to all those "in the know." Perhaps it was even from Paul himself that these people had learned that as Christians they were free from the Law, and therefore they could not be bound by rules and regulations. The only reality to which they were bound was the experience of being "in Christ."

Paul breaks out in singing early Christian hymn rooted in Hellenistic Judaism (e.g., Wis. 8:1, 6). The hymn proclaimed God's actions in creation ("from whom all things") but also attributed to Christ a role in those acts ("through whom all things"), forming the background for the claims about food in 8:8 (cf. also 10:26). The final phrase, "we through him [Christ]

exist," is parallel to the statement "we to him [God] exist," showing that in Christ a new relationship with God exists. **Steven J. Kraftchick**

It appears that the social life of the upper classes in Corinth revolved around frequent feasts, banquets, celebrations, and public events held in dining spaces related to temples and that the well-to-do patronized the meat markets connected with the temples for the meat used in their own households. If a person had scruples against eating meat offered to idols, it would have virtually excluded them from participation in the social life of Corinthian society.

However, also present in the Corinthian church were more ordinary working people whose incomes and habits allowed for very little meat in their diets. For these people, who didn't "know any better," eating meat offered to idols threatened faith by drawing them back to the idolatrous cultures from which they had only recently been converted to the Christian faith.

Paul's own convictions were similar to those "in the know." Food, as such, had nothing to do with salvation, idols have no existence of their own, and Christians are free from the Law. Yet Paul did not take sides favoring the strong (those who eat idol meat) against the weak (those who refrain). Instead, Paul made the point that knowledge without love "puffs up," while wise and knowing love "builds up" the community. This is the basis for Paul's statements that insisting on one's freedom to eat idol food not only harms others, but actually is a sin against Christ (vv. 11 and 12).

At the heart of Paul's message was a peculiar understanding of Christian freedom. Freedom is not the right to choose to do as one wishes. It is not simply a lack of restrictions or a negation of the Law or of other requirements. Christian freedom is grounded in love, God's love for us in

Jesus Christ. If love is a matter of knowledge, it is God's knowing of us. As Martin Luther was to learn from Paul, "[A] Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Freedom is slavery to Christ, so that in the Christian life we become responsible for one another. That is central to what it means to be "in Christ." For that reason, in any conflict, relationships are as important an element in decision making and behavior as are the facts of the case. Paul came down very hard on those who justify their behavior on the basis of theological arguments, even arguments with which he agreed. He himself would, if necessary, become a vegetarian for the rest of his life rather than harm those who would be hurt by his eating idol meat.

This passage opens a deliberation of the relationship between individual freedom and responsibility for a community's overall health (8:1-11:1), instigated by questions over eating idol meat. This brief account raises many questions for our own congregational life. We might ask what are the appropriate relationships between the church and our surrounding cultures. What practices should the church condone or condemn in relation to the cultures of secularism, materialism, and nationalism? How can the church speak boldly about the issues being faced if everyone is of a different opinion? The range of issues is immense, from whether the American flag should be displayed in the sanctuary, to poverty in our society, to whether gay and lesbian Christians may hold positions of leadership in congregations, or even if one can be a homosexual and Christian. At the heart of it all is whether the church views Christ as one who teaches us to build fortresses to protect Christian community or as one who is himself the bridge to neighbors of even other faiths and traditions.

Paul wanted his Corinthian friends and all of us to know that being certain of what is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, is not enough, even if one's position is correct. Love is greater than knowledge! This is particularly true in connection with the "weaker" ones among us.

Does this require, then, refraining from any behavior or position that is disapproved, because of the sometimes narrow-minded consciences and outlooks of the weaker minority in a congregation? That would make prophetic witness on the part of individuals or congregations nearly impossible, and it is not what Paul intends, as illustrated in 1 Corinthians 10:29-30. Paul's point is that when we hurt others, we hurt Christ himself because we cause pain in his body, the church. To hurt those for whom Christ died is to commit sin. Above all else, we are called to show reconciling love in the church, and that has a direct bearing on what we do and how we do it.

As we read this text, Paul's principal concern is to guard the integrity of the church and to do so in such a way that "weaker" members will be protected from the destructive temptations of the surrounding culture, which would lure them away from faith in Christ. In the final analysis, this is about loving God and loyalty to Christ himself, which has to be expressed by sometimes costly sensitivity toward weaker fellow Christians.

Knowledge without love puffs up, but knowledgeable love builds up the community. **V. Bruce Rigdon**

We don't want to be like my 4 year-old grandson, who says that he loves me except when he loses at a game. If he does not win, he is not happy. If we love God, we will love one another and it will not matter who wins.

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