

Sermon for The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - based on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
January 28, 2018
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A reading from 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

^{8:1} Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.

⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ “Food will not bring us close to God.”^[a] We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.^[b] ¹² But when you thus sin against members of your family,^[c] and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Reader: The Word of the Lord
All: **Thanks be to God**

Opening Prayer

And Paul writes, “Take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”

How many of you have recently eaten meat sacrificed to an idol?

The issue before the Corinthian Church and Paul may seem irrelevant and of little or no importance to our life today. Eating food (most likely meat) sacrificed to idols is not part of our experience and as such we may dismiss this passage, but if we do we will lose an important message - a message which speaks to us across time and space about how we, as a community of believers, deal with our differences, address issues and live out our life of faith. For Paul’s message to the Corinthians, is God’s message to us - that our actions, even when we think that they are right, are not so much an opportunity to be right, but to do what is right for another.

The city of Corinth, located 80 km south of Athens, controlled two major harbours which connected the trade routes between Asia and Rome. It was a vibrant, multicultural city at the hub of the Mediterranean World.

Many Corinthian Christians had converted from the worship of pagan gods or idols, whether that was Aphrodite, Poseidon, Apollo or a host of other options. As part of pagan and idol worship it was customary to sacrifice an animal. Part of the animal would be burnt as an offering to the gods, the remaining meat would be given first to the priests (sensible policy!), then to the public officials and the remaining meat would be sold at market. Chances were that if you lived in Corinth and purchased meat, it had been sacrificed as idol worship.

The challenge for the Corinthian Christians became this: for some, they understood that as idols were not real, eating meat sacrificed to them was no different than eating any other food. They knew they were right, so why not do it? It appears that others in the community thought differently: to eat meat sacrificed to idols may have been seen as condoning idol worship itself or, at the very least

created confusion. So, in a profoundly unlikely scenario you have one group who think that there is nothing wrong with what they are doing, and a second group who think that what they are doing is wrong. (*This of course would never happen today!*)

How many of you have found yourself in a conflict situation where you thought you were right?

How many of you have found yourself in a conflict situation where you thought the other person was wrong?

(And so we enter the text!)

While the presenting issue before Paul may be distant from our understanding, the deeper question of how we act, and the impact it has on others, is as important for us to hear as it was for the Corinthians. To be honest, Paul makes it clear that on a philosophical level he has no problem with eating meat sacrificed to idols, but thinking you know what is right, or thinking that what you are doing does not cause harm to others is not the end of the story. Paul tells them and us, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" and it is this latter reality which comes to the forefront.

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying "Anyone can know. The challenge is to understand." The understanding that Paul challenges us with is that our actions, whether or not we think they are right, have consequences. And if those consequences cause others to stumble then being right is not enough. Paul writes "Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." The challenge for the Corinthians, and for us, is this: Does the way we exercise our liberty/freedom, whether it is in our actions or our words cause others to stumble? Do we seek to build up or to tear down?

Each of us have situations in our life where we think we are right. And each of us have situations in our life where we think that there is nothing wrong about our words or actions. Think for a moment of those situations:

Will acting on that knowledge create a stumbling block for others?

Will our words or actions build up or tear down?

Does Paul's teaching have any relevance for us today?

I suspect that each and every one of us gathered here today have been both shocked and dismayed with the ever increasing list of those who have been charged, or had allegations made against them, in respect to sexual assault or sexual harassment. Every day it appears that the list just continues to grow. How many of you watched or heard about the Golden Globe Awards? If you did, there was a powerful statement of solidarity among the attendees opposing such actions of sexual assault and harassment. There was also at the Awards show, at least for me, something very unsettling. As the host pointed out and called out the names of those who have been accused, a large portion of the audience laughing along. I remember sitting there and thinking "when we point a finger at someone else, we are left with four fingers pointing back at ourselves." How much easier is it to point at someone else rather than really examine how our own actions, inactions or avoidance may have brought harm to others?

The illustration I am about to use is not typical and perhaps, a bit outside the box, but here goes...

One of my all time favourite TV series is "The West Wing." How many of you remember that series? It was a series which featured a fictional U.S. Democratic President, Jed Bartlett, and the internal workings of - you guessed it - the West Wing! The series always struck me as politically relevant, astute and politically correct. But in re-watching some episodes over the past few weeks I have suddenly realized the presence of sexualized language and negative comments that I had never noticed before. (The example that I am about to use is not intended to offend. I have deliberately chosen to not change the actual words as I think that is important to not gloss over the language.)

In an episode from Season 4 (in 2002) entitled "Swiss Diplomacy", President Bartlett has just won a second term in office. It is the day after the election and he is walking with his Press Secretary, Claudia Jean (C.J.) Craig, and other Senior Staff who are prepping him for a Press Conference.

C. J. Craig asks, “Mr. President, how do you interpret your marginal victory?” The President replies, “Well, the votes have been counted, and the people have spoken, and it is clear that their will is for me to be able to do and have anything I want.”

There are further questions from others, then, C.J. Craig says to him, “Mr. President, GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth is strong.”

And President Bartlett replies,

“You bet your ass it is, which by the way I can pat anytime I want now - the voters have spoken.... ”

His Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry whispers in his ear, “Mr. President both you and I enjoy your funny jokes but [others] not so much....”

I have probably watched that episode dozens of times since 2002 but, embarrassingly, I had never noticed the implication, and demoralization, of what was being said. In fact, the first time I noticed I said to myself, “he didn’t just say that” and rewound the video several times to make sure I had heard what I thought I had heard. It was far outside the actual character of Jed Bartlett and I cannot help but suspect that the writer of the series thought it was just a “funny joke” where no harm could be done so why not include it? I do not think that there can be any doubt that harm was done...people, perhaps watching who had had their ass patted and had it made into a joke and still others who may have taken it as permission to speak or act in a similar way. And I couldn’t help but wonder, how many other times have I not noticed, spoken up or chosen to see it as a “funny joke”? And to be even more honest, the times that come to my mind do not just involve men saying or doing what causes harm to women but also involves women saying or doing what causes harm to men. And so it is that at least for me there is one, if not more, fingers pointing back to me.

The passage before us about whether one should or should not eat meat sacrificed to idols may seem irrelevant today but through this passage Paul reminds us of the powers of our actions and inactions. Paul also reminds us that whether or not we

think we are right, or have the right, whether or not we think that there is nothing wrong with our actions, we are called to act in a way which does not create stumbling blocks. We are called to build up rather than tear down. That is the example which Jesus sets before u, it is the example which Paul sets before the Corinthians and it is the example we are called to follow.

Make no mistake - it is not an easy road. Because at all time and in all places, it means putting the needs of others before our own needs.