

Epiphany 4, Year B

February 1, 2015

1 Corinthians 8: 1 - 13

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." 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. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, 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.

Many of the people of ancient Corinth sacrificed animals to Roman, Greek, or other pagan gods, idols carved out of stone or wood. And since those wood and stone idols never ate much, the meat of these animals was made available for *people* to consume. But this raised a dilemma for Christians. One scholar describes it this way:

“In Corinth, there *was* no ‘secular’ slaughter of animals for meat. Virtually **all** meat came from animals that had been offered to Greek and Roman deities... [Now] the Christians at Corinth knew that idols did not *really* exist because there is only one God (v.4). But did this knowledge mean it was OK for them to eat meat offered to these so-called gods – or did eating this meat actually support the worship of false gods?” (*New Proclamation, Year B, 1999-2000*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, p. 108)

The question *for Jews* had been settled by the famous Rabbi Akiba, who ruled that no Jew could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. (*Victor Bible Background Commentary*) What, then, should a *Christian* do? That’s the issue Paul is dealing with in his letter to the Corinthians.

Some Corinthian Christians reasoned that since “An idol has no real existence” (v. 4), they were thus free to eat such meat. Paul agrees with their assessment. Yes, they *are* free in Christ to eat meat sacrificed to idols, since no idol really exists. But that *theological* point must come to grips with a **pastoral** issue. Paul writes (and I’m reading from a different Bible translation than what is in the bulletin): “Some people have been so *used* to idols that to this day when they eat such food they **still** think of it as food that belongs to an idol; their conscience is weak, and they feel they are defiled by the food...” (v. 7, TEV) Paul instructs the Christians who *know* they are **free** to eat such meat to *abstain* from it if it is going to cause a fellow Christian a problem. “Take care,” Paul tells these confident meat-eaters, “lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the vulnerable... Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother’s falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall.” (vss. 9, 13) “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” (v. 1)

Relationship takes precedence over knowledge or “being right”.

It is a message, I think, for all of us who claim to have “knowledge” which others don’t have. In one translation of our Epistle, verse 2 reads: “Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much.” (NLT) Paul, himself educated as a Pharisee and a master of Greek rhetoric, tries to bring a little humility to those who put excessive stock in their own knowledge.

All of us -- myself certainly included -- who get overly caught up in our knowledge, or our certainty about some issue, would do well to listen to Paul here – all of us who get caught up in exercising our “rights” without regard to the *effect* our words or actions have on others; all of us who take a stand on being “right” without regard to being loving.

Those who are familiar with boating have probably seen the sign, “All boats are responsible for their wakes, and the damage they cause.” In the State of Oregon, this is a law: a boater is **legally** responsible for his or her boat’s wake and the damage or personal injury it causes, no matter how large or small the wake. <http://www.oregon.gov/OSMB/library/docs/watchwake.pdf>

People need to be aware of **their** wakes, also -- of the impact which speaking or exercising their freedom has upon others. After the inexcusable shootings at the Paris office of satirical French magazine Charlie Hebdo, several Christian leaders, while defending the right of free speech, nonetheless noted that our speech affects others, and we need to be aware of, and at least in part responsible for, the effects of our speech. “You can’t make a toy out of the religions of others,” Pope Francis said. “...In freedom of expression there are limits.” Yes, as signs around the world stated, “I am Charlie”; but I am also the Muslim across the street from me. University of Chicago professor Martin Marty quotes Rabbi David Lerner, who warns of all sorts of dehumanizing in our media today. Lerner wrote: “[W]e tolerate the kind of endless put-downs that the ‘humor’ magazines and even

supposedly liberal comedians like Bill Maher perpetrate, not realizing how much damage all of this does to our souls.”

<https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/blasphemy-and-freedom-martin-e-marty>

How much damage all of this does to our souls. We must remember that the word “sarcasm” literally means “tearing the flesh”. Jesus notes that one of the two Great Commandments is (and I use a legitimate translation), “Love your neighbor who is yourself.” Yes, I am Charlie, but I am also my Hindu, Moslem, or Atheist neighbor.

One preacher on today’s Epistle sees the problems of the Corinthian Church as a matter of two gifts of God in tension with each other. On the one hand, we have the gift of freedom in Christ; and so yes, the Corinthians *are* free to eat meat sacrificed to idols, because of this gift of freedom. But on the other hand, we have also been given the gift of each other; we have been made members one of another in Christ, and with *that* gift comes a responsibility for each other.

Presbyterian pastor Charles Grant writes: “The dynamic of the conflict between gifts and the tension between the needs of the [vulnerable] and the liberties of the strong is ‘an interplay of two *goods*, not two evils. Both Christian liberty **and** the presence of the brother or sister are marvelous gifts from a bountiful God.”

(*Ibid.*, p. 34)

The issue for us Christians living out our lives in faithfulness is: How do we use *both* of these gifts in the service of love, in the service of the Gospel? Martin Luther put the tension starkly in his famous statement: “The Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; **and** the Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Of course, Luther was simply re-phrasing St. Paul, who wrote to the Galatians (5: 13): “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.”

We live in this tension between freedom and service, between liberty and responsibility.

But in the mystery of the Christian life, we find that these two opposites are *actually one*. In the *Collect for Peace* in our Prayer Book (p. 99), we say to God: “to **serve** You *is* perfect freedom.” It has been said of Mother Teresa that “she was free to be nothing. Therefore God could use her for anything.” *That* kind of freedom, the freedom to be nothing, is in sharp contrast to the freedom which some of those Corinthians claimed for themselves – and which *we* sometimes claim for **ourselves** – speaking, acting, behaving in ways that, though not unlawful, may harm other persons, animals, or God’s Creation. In the year 2011, the per capita emissions of CO₂ for the United States was 17.3 tons – yes, each one of us was responsible for 17.3 tons of CO₂ emissions that year, the highest per capita emissions rate in the world. Are we legally free to drive our vehicles as much as we want? To turn up the temperature in our furnaces or water heaters as high as we want? Yes. Are we also responsible for our wakes? Yes.

Relationship and responsibility; freedom and fulfillment. It is not a dichotomy; it is a unity which encompasses who we are.

The Corinthian Christians had the knowledge that there were no idols, and that therefore there was nothing intrinsically wrong with eating meat. But Paul admonished them not to *exercise* that freedom if it caused someone else to stumble. We must be responsible for our wakes. Yes, we *are* free: free in our relationship to all humankind to be servants of our brothers and sisters; free, like Mother Teresa, to be nothing, and in our emptiness to be vessels of God's love to the world, free to love and receive love.

That is the nature of living in this world created by a God whose *service* is perfect freedom.

AMEN