

## Epiphany 4, Year B

January 28, 2018

*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 the ancient Greek city of Corinth sacrificed animals in front of statues representing Roman, Greek, or other pagan gods. And since those statues did not eat the meat of those sacrificed animals, that meat was made available for *people* to consume. The dead animals were taken directly from the pagan temples to the butcher shop. But this raised a dilemma for Christians. One Bible 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?”<sup>1</sup>

Many of the Christians in Corinth argue that since “an idol has no real existence,”<sup>2</sup> they are thus free to eat such meat. And St. Paul agrees with them. Yes, Paul writes, they *are* free in Christ to eat meat sacrificed to idols, since no idol *really* exists. But Paul is quick to add that the fact that they are “right” in their position does not mean that **acting** on that “right belief” is kind or loving to other Christians who may have a “weak conscience.” Paul writes (and I read

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...”<sup>3</sup> Paul therefore instructs the Corinthian Christians who *know* they are **free** to eat such meat to nevertheless *abstain* from doing so 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...”<sup>4</sup> “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” Paul writes.<sup>5</sup> Yes, these meat-eating Corinthians may have the “correct” knowledge, but *acting in love* is **far** more important than having correct knowledge. As a Christian, *relationship* takes precedence over my freedom or my “rights” if, in the *exercise* of my freedom or rights, I harm someone else.

All of us who get overly caught up in our knowledge, or our being “right” about some issue, or who insist on our freedom to exercise our “rights” (religious, political, or otherwise), would do well to listen to Paul here. Yes, we may be “right.” Yes, we may be legally free to practice our religion the way we want. We may have the constitutional right to free speech. But St. Paul clearly warns us that we should never get so caught up in exercising our “rights” and “freedoms” that we disregard the *effect* our words or actions have on others. “... take care,” Paul writes, “that this **liberty** of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”<sup>6</sup> Paul knows that he is free to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but he states (and again I read a different translation), “... if food causes the downfall of my brother or sister, I won’t eat meat ever again, or else I may cause my brother or sister to fall.”<sup>7</sup>

Those of you who have a boat, or 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.<sup>8</sup>

My friends, *we* need to be aware of **our** wakes, also – of the impact which speaking or exercising our freedom has upon others.

Three years ago this month, two members of an Al Qaida cell in France entered the Paris office of satirical French magazine Charlie Hebdo and shot and killed 12 people. They did this in response to a cartoon published on the cover of that magazine which made a fool of the prophet Mohammed. Was it *lawful*, under French law, to publish a cartoon which mocked the religion of Islam? Yes, it was lawful; France honors freedom of speech, just as we do in America. But was it *kind and loving* to the thousands of Muslims who live in France, or was it malicious and hurtful? *That’s* the question Paul raises for us.

While the actions of those two terrorists were abominable and were justly condemned by people of good faith the world over – including a majority of

Muslims – some Christian leaders, while defending the right of free speech, nonetheless raised Paul’s point that our speech and actions affect others, and we need to be aware of, and responsible for, the **effects** of our acting on our freedoms. After the Charlie Hebdo murders, Pope Francis stated, “You can’t make a toy out of the religions of others... In freedom of expression there are limits.” After the Charlie Hebdo murders, we saw people around the world expressing their mourning for the victims and their solidarity with the magazine and its right to free speech. Signs and Facebook posts from around the world stated, “I am Charlie.” But the core of my Christian faith teaches me that I am also my Muslim, Hindu, or Atheist neighbor; I am also **one**, in the Body of Christ, with those members of whatever political party is the opposite of my own. One of the two Great Commandments of Jesus can be stated, “Love your neighbor who **is** yourself.” Responding to the Charlie Hebdo murders, Rabbi David Lerner said that the incident should remind us in the West of *other* kinds of dehumanizing expression in our media. Rabbi Lerner wrote: “[W]e tolerate the kind of endless put-downs that the ‘humor’ magazines... perpetrate, not realizing how much damage all of this does to our souls.”<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Lerner wrote that three years ago, but I think we can all admit that soul-damaging dehumanization *still* occurs in our media today – including our social media – Twitter and Facebook and the like – where politicians and celebrities seem to feel more and more at liberty to denigrate others. Thankfully, the recent groundswell in our country *against* the dehumanizing words and actions of sexual harassment has been a welcome turn in the other direction!

One preacher on today’s Epistle sees the problems of Paul’s day and ours 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 Corinthian Christians *were* free to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and the editors of Charlie Hebdo *were* free to print that cartoon of Mohammed on their magazine cover. But in addition to the gift of freedom, 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.<sup>10</sup>

Martin Luther put this 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:<sup>11</sup> “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.” The question for us Christians living out our lives in faithfulness is: How do we use *both* of these gifts – freedom **and** responsibility - in the service of love, in the service of the Gospel, in the service of each other?

Do I live according to the Gospel if I speak, act, or behave in ways that, though not unlawful, may still harm other persons, animals, or God’s Creation? Taking a modern example of how our freedom might harm God’s creation, I recently read

the shocking fact that in the year 2013, the per capita emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> for the United States was 18 tons<sup>12</sup> – each one of us Americans was responsible for creating 18 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2013. And we *know* the scientifically-verifiable fact that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere absorbs infrared heat waves, increasing our global temperature. In producing 18 tons of carbon dioxide each year, each one of us contributes to that rise in global temperature.

Are we legally free to drive our cars as much as we want? To turn up the thermostats on our furnaces or water heaters as high as we want, turn down the thermostats on our air conditioners as low as we want? Yes. Are we also responsible for our wakes? Yes.

And both you and I could come up with similar examples of how exercising our freedom of *speech* and *action* harms the souls of other people, and harms our own souls as we do so.

The Corinthian Christians had the **knowledge** that there are no idols, and that therefore there was nothing *intrinsically* wrong with eating meat. But Paul admonished them not to *exercise* their freedom if it harmed someone else.

And Paul's message is just as relevant, and urgent, for us today.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> *New Proclamation, Year B, 1999-2000*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, p. 108

<sup>2</sup> v. 4

<sup>3</sup> v. 7, TEV

<sup>4</sup> vs. 9

<sup>5</sup> v. 1

<sup>6</sup> vs. 9

<sup>7</sup> v. 13, CEB

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.oregon.gov/OSMB/library/docs/watchwake.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/blasphemy-and-freedom-martin-e-marty>

<sup>10</sup> *New Proclamation, ibid.*, Presbyterian pastor Charles Grant, p. 34

<sup>11</sup> Gal. 5:13

<sup>12</sup>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_carbon\\_dioxide\\_emissions\\_per\\_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_carbon_dioxide_emissions_per_capita) I have converted from metric tons to U.S. tons.