

Fourth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/B): "Knowledge Puffs Up, Love Builds Up"  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28  
January 30-31, 2021

Sometimes I look at the Scripture lesson assigned for a weekend and think, "What were **they** thinking?": "they" being the folks who created the 3 year lectionary we use in worship. As Lutherans, we follow a set schedule of readings, as do Episcopalians and Roman Catholics, and whoever else chooses to accept the discipline of the lectionary. It's not the whole Bible over 3 years. There's a lot of stuff that doesn't get any air time, some of it quite interesting, so when we have a reading that seems unrelated to real life or just plain weird, I wonder "Why? Why did **this** make the cut??" That's how I felt about this weekend's lesson from 1 Corinthians in which Paul talks about whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols –**not** a moral issue over which **we've** ever struggled.

I thought, "Ok, I'll preach on the Gospel instead – that's got some potential." But then the Holy Spirit pulled me back to this verse in 1 Corinthians. "*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*" (1 Cor. 8:1c) We can definitely work with that.

First let me share a little historical background to help us understand and be spiritually nourished by this passage. 1 Corinthians is a letter that Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, Greece, in the middle of the first century (early 50's A.D). He'd established the Christian community there awhile before, then moved on to other mission fields. When he was in Ephesus, he received a letter from members of the faith family in Corinth, telling him they were in a bit of a muddle and asking his advice on some issues that were creating big-time divisions among them. One of the points of conflict was whether Christians should eat meat that had been part of a pagan temple ritual. You remember how animals were sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem as part of worship there? Same deal in pagan temples. Animals were slaughtered right there, as a way to

ask favors or forgiveness of the gods, other times to offer thanks. Some of the meat was burnt on the altar as a gift to the god whose temple it was. Some of the meat that wasn't barbecued was given to the people who paid for the sacrifice and who invited guests to what became a very nice feast on the temple grounds, an ancient form of al fresco dining (without the masks!). Whatever was left of the carcass was then sold at market. The markets were located in close proximity to the temples, for obvious commercial reasons.

A basic question I had was, "**Why** would a Christian be participating in a pagan ritual?" Then I learned that the post-sacrifice meals often became actual parties (part of weddings and birthdays) and were social as much as religious events. Wealthy Corinthian Christians who had businesses or a role in government were invited to those social occasions and used them as networking opportunities. Christians in Corinth were in the vast minority, so many of your neighbors and business associates were **bound** to be pagans. If they invited you to a party and you refused to eat, you would be dishonoring the host. Many of the Corinthian Christians didn't have a problem eating the meat that had been sacrificed to idols, because they didn't believe any gods existed other than the one true God. But some of them had pangs of conscience, because they themselves had **been** pagans, and remembered all too well their own history of worshiping in those temples and offering sacrifice to those gods (with a small g). They didn't feel like they should engage in the behavior that was theirs **before** they were baptized.

Those for whom this wasn't an issue saw that as ridiculous. If the gods to whom the meat was offered didn't exist, what was the problem? So they wrote Paul, hoping, I'm sure, that he was going to tell their overly scrupulous pew partners to get with it and grow up. But to their surprise, and probably to their dismay, Paul tells **them** to grow up. He says, "You think you're so smart –

but you're not smart enough to see that your sense of moral and intellectual superiority is hurting your neighbor. That's dumb. That's wrong."

There could have been some class distinction operating here, too. The little guy who didn't have a well-paying job, an education or much social standing wasn't really a carnivore, really didn't eat meat. He couldn't afford it. He wasn't invited to fancy parties at the temple and his only shot at having a burger was the occasional block party when the government fed everyone for free. So maybe he was afraid that if he accepted meat that had been sacrificed he was letting his hunger override his faith.

Paul's word to those on the other side of the argument was, "Be more concerned about your neighbor's soul than your unshakeable belief that eating this meat is not wrong. Don't create a spiritual headache for your neighbor. Don't be a stumbling block for them. Don't risk drawing them back, by your example, into a worship life they renounced when they were baptized." As one commentator paraphrased Paul, "Christ died for this person and you can't even change your diet?"<sup>1</sup>

What "rights" are we willing to give up for our neighbor's benefit? "Don't tread on me!" is not a Christian sentiment. Nor is, "It's my life, I'll do as I please." One of Martin Luther's most famous treatises is "On the Freedom of a Christian." He wrote,

A Christian is an utterly **free** man, lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, **servant** of all, subject to all.<sup>2</sup>

As our Lord Jesus willingly laid aside his freedom as Son of God to become human and die for us (see Philippians 2....), so we are willingly to **choose** to limit our own freedom when our neighbor's welfare calls us to do so. "Christ died for this person and you can't even....[fill in the blank for your situation]?"

The Christian is at once utterly free in faith and a servant to all in works of love. Christian life is lived between these twin poles of faith and love. This is the paradoxical Christian freedom as Luther taught the Church.<sup>3</sup>

On Ash Wednesday, February 17, I'll be giving the noontime devotion for the Ministerium's virtual Soupless Scripture series. Our theme this year is, "Jesus frees us." Jesus frees us to practice self-denial that isn't objectively required but that we impose on ourselves because our love of neighbor is greater than our need to claim every right and exercise every freedom. One example for myself is that I don't commune when I worship at local Roman Catholic churches for funerals or weddings. I lay aside my baptismal invitation to the Lord's Table because I don't want to create a mental and spiritual stumbling block for the others who know I'm a Lutheran pastor and would be troubled that I am communing. (I also don't commune because even though those sanctuaries are the Lord's House, I believe it's polite to follow the rules of the humans who worship there.) "Christ died for these people and I can't even pass up Holy Communion once??"

A wise person I know has said, "It's possible to be so right that you're wrong" -- that is, we're wrong when we use even an objective truth to diminish somebody else, when we employ the truth to elevate ourselves, when we insist on "telling it like it is," and miserably fail to "tell the truth **in love**." *"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."* *"By this they will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:35) Amen

<sup>1</sup>Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation series, Louisville: John Knox, 1997), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup>Translation by Rev. Travis J. Loeslie, "On the Freedom of a Christian" (lutheranreformation.org, March 20, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

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