

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 1, 2009
Epiphany 4
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

In today's epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth about an issue that would seem to have absolutely no relevance whatsoever for us. But as we unpack his discussion with the believers at Corinth, we discover that what Paul says to them is extremely relevant for us, and includes some of the most practical advice we could ever hear.

It's no secret that what we know as 1 Corinthians is Paul's response to a prior letter that the Corinthian believers had sent to him. Corinth was a large, cosmopolitan, and pagan city, and the new Christians in the church there felt great pressure to conform to the pagan culture around them. They experienced many challenges and problems, some of which they communicated to Paul, and 1 Corinthians is Paul's attempt to answer some of those questions.

In the case of our lesson today, a dispute had arisen over the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. In that day, especially in the Greek and Roman world, the meat you might buy at the marketplace for your dinner on a given night had arrived at the market after being used in worship rituals in pagan temples where animals were sacrificed to idols or pagan gods. In addition, many social gatherings and

events were often structured such that the fellowship and food were also part of a religious sacrifice to some deity.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of what some already knew and had expressed in their letter to him, namely, that idols were not real and had no basis in reality. As he says in verses 4 and 6, “we know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God and no other. There is only one God, the Father, who created everything, and we exist for him.”

The problem is that everyone is not at the same place spiritually. Some of these new Christians at Corinth had spent many years living with the conviction that idols were real, and they were struggling to change these thoughts. Their struggle was perhaps similar to stories we’ve heard about tribes deep in the heart of Africa who respond to the Gospel message, but struggle to shake off their long-held beliefs in witchcraft or Shamanism.

For some of these new Christians at Corinth, their consciences were deeply troubled at the thought of eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol, in spite of the fact that Paul says their freedom in Christ made it a non-issue.

Here’s where the problem seems to arise. Apparently, some of the “enlightened” believers in the church for whom this issue was not a problem had written to Paul arguing that those who were struggling with this issue needed to be “built up” in their faith by forcing them to eat meat sacrificed to idols. They

argued that all believers should eat meat offered to idols as a way to demonstrate their Christian maturity and freedom in Christ.

Paul's response to this argument is very telling. While it is true that an idol is not real and that freedom in Christ makes this a non-issue, there is a greater principle at work here, says Paul.

The issue here, says Paul, is that *our actions as Christians are not based merely on what we know, but on our concern for other Christians, and the influence our actions will have on them.* Our freedom in Christ is real, but it is not absolute. It is not a freedom to do anything we please without regard for consequences. It is a freedom to *serve*. Freedom to serve Christ and others. And if, in doing something that may be entirely right and proper, we make another Christian stumble, we are sinning against God and our fellow believer.

I have always wanted to go to Northern California and see the giant Sequoia trees. I don't know for sure if this is accurate, but I read recently that the Sequoias actually have a very shallow root system. The roots on these giants, rather than tunneling deep beneath the ground, actually go just below surface level.

That amazes me. How, then, do these trees grow to be so tall and so large? I was always taught that a tree only grows as strong as its roots are deep. What's up with the Sequoias?

It seems that Sequoias only grow in groves, where their roots intertwine and their limbs interconnect with each other. When the strong winds blow, they hold each other up.

That, I thought, is a picture of the local church. The church grows and is built not just on how much she *knows*, but by how deeply she *loves*! Epworth Chapel on the Green is at her strongest when we are bound together to each other through bonds of love and servant hood. We are at our best when our lives are interconnected such that we consider not only our own actions based upon what we feel is right, but also the effects of our actions on others.

As we do this, we discover another important principle of Christian liberty that Paul addresses. The apostle makes a compelling statement in verse 13: “If what I eat is going to make another Christian sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live, for I don’t want to make another Christian stumble.”

What Paul has discovered is the truth that what we *want* is sometimes not as important as what someone else *needs*.

The story is told of a young mother who went to Gandhi and asked for his help with her son. She said to Gandhi: “My son has horrible eating habits. He consumes very large quantities of sugar. Would you speak to him? He will listen to you if you tell him to stop eating so much sugar.”

Gandhi replied, “Please come back in a week and make your request again.”

Seven days later, the mother returned. “My son’s problem continues,” she said. “I am so worried about his health. He rarely eats vegetables and fruits. Please, won’t you talk to him about the danger of eating too much sugar?”

Ghandi replied again, “Please come back to me in a week.”

The mother was disappointed. But she persisted. She returned a week later and once again asked Ghandi to help her son. This time, Ghandi agreed to speak with the boy.

After Ghandi finished speaking with her son, the grateful mother approached him and said, “I am thankful you took the time to speak with my son, but I don’t understand why you made me return and ask you three times to do so?”

Ghandi looked at her and said: “I didn’t realize how hard it was going to be for me to give up sugar.”

Our freedom in Christ is genuine. It is real. But ultimately it is freedom to love and serve others, especially those who are called along side us in the local church. True freedom comes in the community of faith, where we join arms and hands and hearts together and where we are as concerned about the effects of our actions upon others as we are about the actions themselves.

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, let us do so with the attitude of the Apostle Paul, who said, “I want my life to be about building other

Christians up. I want my life to be about helping others grow in their walk with Christ. I want my freedom in Christ to be a freedom that serves others.”

God not only blesses this kind of humble spirit -- He also uses it to build up the church, one living stone at a time.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.