

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Love Trumps Sophistication

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

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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.

Our readings this morning all deal with God's supernatural spiritual enemies. Moses prophesies in Deuteronomy 18 that a prophet would one day follow him. This passage comes directly after God explicitly forbids for his people

Israel “**the abhorrent practices**” of the Gentile nations in Canaan: child sacrifice, divination, fortune telling, consulting mediums, witchcraft, and so forth. In our gospel reading, Jesus amazes his audience by teaching with authority, and then demonstrates his divine authority over evil spirits by commanding one to come out of a man.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians 8, Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth “**concerning food sacrificed to idols.**” The people in the Old and New Testaments took it for granted that the world around them was populated with supernatural beings, gods and spirits, either real or imagined. These days, if you travel to third world countries or traditional, non-industrial countries, you can find that people there take the supernatural dimension of everyday life very seriously.

We don’t. At least we don’t officially. But a huge amount of popular culture consists of ghost stories and movies populated by evil intelligences, vampires, zombies, witches and the like. Most of these are imaginary: Tinkerbell is a benign example; Dracula is an evil one. But we must not think that all of these things are just imagined. Evil does exist, and not just in the abstract, and not just in human nature. Demons are real. The gospels and Acts have multiple accounts of Jesus and the apostles commanding them to come out of people. They are called “unclean spirits” because often they are attracted to sinful attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors. For example, people who are determined to find out the future through fortune telling or a Ouija Board often get help from an evil spirit without knowing it. Fortune telling is one of the practices God considers “**abhorrent**” in Deuteronomy 18, just before our Old Testament lesson this morning.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul is responding to Christians in Corinth who had asked him a question in a previous letter about “**food sacrificed to idols.**” Scholars have identified phrases in what we just read as quotations from the Corinthians’ earlier letter to Paul. Those are the phrases that are printed in quotation marks in our text. Remember that the Corinthian Christians were Gentiles. They had been converted to Christ out of a pagan culture where devotion to household gods, minor local gods, and the major gods of Rome was part of what you did every day. Temples were everywhere. Formal sacrificial fellowship meals at the temples, complete with ritual incantations and prayers to these gods were an important part of social life. It appears that some of the Corinthian Christians felt they were theologically knowledgeable and sophisticated enough to share temple meals with their pagan friends with no harm done.

Corinth a relatively new city. After it was completely destroyed by invaders in 146 B.C., it began to be rebuilt in 44 B.C. We know Paul spent 18

months there between 51 and 53 A.D. (Acts 18:11), so the rebuilt Corinth was less than a hundred years old. People had moved there from many different ethnic and racial groups, and they built temples to the gods they brought with them. These temple fellowships gave people a sense of belonging, a place where they could meet people and put down roots and eat with their friends and discharge their worship responsibilities as good citizens.

Some of Corinthian Christians undoubtedly had friends and neighbors and probably family members who were members of the cult of Serapis or Juno or Isis. Even if these Christians had accepted Christ as Lord, been filled with the Holy Spirit and believed there was only one God, there was strong social pressure to continue relationships in these temple fellowships.

In our passage, we can see from the statements in quotation marks that Paul and the Corinthians agree on some things. They agree that **"all of us possess knowledge," "no idol in the world really exists," and "there is no God but one."** But Paul looks at these points of agreement differently than the people who wrote them to him. He basically says, **"Maybe your theological knowledge that idols are meaningless and that there's only one God means that God accepts your eating in an idol temple. But some of your fellow parishioners have worshiped these so-called 'gods' all their lives. What if one of them has a weak conscience; that is, what if they are easily led away from the truth by your influence? If someone who isn't as knowledgeable or sophisticated a Christian as you are sees you eating a temple meal, might they not think it's OK to worship both a pagan God and the true God? Or worse, go back to the temple fellowship for good and fall away from Christ and his body?"**

Paul isn't focused here directly on whether Christians should or shouldn't eat idol food. He'll get to that later. Right now he's focused on how the Corinthian Christians treat each other. How they treat each other has eternal consequences. He says, **"take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."** He exhorts his readers to lay down whatever rights they think their superior theological and spiritual knowledge give them out of concern for others. This is what Christ did, who laid aside all his power and glory to save us while we were helpless and ignorant and unable to save ourselves. He says, **"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."**

Paul's concern is that the way members of the Corinthian church treat each other can have profound consequences on their eternal spiritual destinies. There were some Corinthian Christians for whom spiritual and theological

knowledge were everything. They'd been introduced to the spiritual realm through the Holy Spirit and were completely focused on it. Paul is telling them that love—putting aside whatever knowledge or experience they might have for the welfare of others—trumps their sophistication. But he has something to say about their so-called sophistication as well: **“Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.”**

He gets to this when he returns to the subject of **“food sacrificed to idols”** in chapter 10. He makes it clear that whatever these sophisticated Christians think they know about temple meals being harmless is wrong. He does compare the idol meals with the Lord's Supper:

“Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. ¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. ²² Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? ²³ “All things are lawful,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. ²⁴ Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” (1 Corinthians 10:16-24)

Apparently some Corinthians ate these temple meals and took part in their demonic rituals with the attitude that they were “just kidding!” Paul points out that God was not kidding when he sent his Son Jesus Christ to free them from sin through his death on the cross and fill them with his Holy Spirit through his resurrection. Jesus wasn't kidding when he said, **“this is my body, which is given for you. This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for your and for many for the remission of sins. Do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me.”** Paul is pointing out the huge spiritual and moral chasm between the **“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”** and the demonic beings the pagans of Corinth worshiped. Paul's overriding concern was that the Corinthians lay down whatever rights or freedoms they supposed they had to

preserve the bond of fellowship and love Christ created among them through his death and resurrection for them. He sums it all up by saying: **“Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.”** It has eternal implications for ourselves and others.

Let’s stop a minute and look at how this applies to us. We are Episcopalians. We are sophisticated. We’ve been to college. For centuries our denomination has insisted on seminary-trained clergy. We like to think we have a sophisticated understanding of the Christian faith. But what Paul writes to the sophisticates in Corinth he could well be writing to many a college-educated mainline American Christian today: don’t assume we’re so sophisticated that we can’t fall ourselves or worse, influence someone else to fall.

The pagan temple fellowships in Corinth were a central focus of people’s social life. The same is true of our churches in Richmond are today, including St. Matthew’s. There’s nothing wrong with that. We all need relationships and support and fellowship for a sense of belonging and rootedness. But let’s not think that what we do in this church is mere social convention. Worship of the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ matters. There is a huge moral and spiritual chasm between Christian relationships and community and worship and the bonds and networks of the world, whether it’s pagan or industrial or modern. Jesus Christ, God himself, became a human being to rescue the human race from the demonic powers of greed, self-centeredness, oppression, and the rest. We are gathered here this morning to remember the events that changed the cosmos forever: Christ’s **“blessed passion and precious death, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension.”** We are here to be empowered anew by and to recognize once again **“the innumerable** (that is, the uncountable) **benefits procured unto us by the same.”** These benefits include his limitless love for us and his Holy Spirit’s power to live holy lives in communion with him, and his freedom to live for him and his love and not for rules and regulations. But love means exercising our freedom in Christ not to insist on our rights, not to **“seek your own advantage, but that of the other.”** Love means telling the world that Jesus came to save us because of God’s love for us, the deepest power in the universe. No one is too sophisticated—or too simple to be beyond the reach of Christ’s love.

Let us pray.

Lord God, you made the heavens and the earth and sent your Son Jesus to redeem us from our mistaken ways of living with you and with one another. Fill us with your Holy Spirit who brought him again from the dead and

give us power to lay down all we are and all we think we are for the honor of his name and good of those around us. Amen.