

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**January 28, 2024**

**1 Corinthians 8:1–13**

Let us pray for and awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Source of all light, by your word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us your spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

**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. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God.

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.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, 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.

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. “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. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a

stumbling block to the weak. 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? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 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.

The text assigned for the day from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is one of those times where scripture may seem so obscure or foreign to us. The situation is so far removed from our own that at first glance it seems like it may be difficult for us to relate to this story in any way. Paul is speaking to a particular community, in a particular time, and about a particular issue. And certainly, the issue Paul is addressing is not one that many of us concern ourselves over, namely, worrying about meat that has been sacrificed to idols. But, when we look at the context of what Paul is speaking to, it is actually a pretty contemporary issue. I do think there is a word for us today from the letter to the Corinthians, because, like Jesus, Paul is able to take the circumstances from an everyday situation, something that those under his care are concerned about, and raise it up a level to a teaching about the faith. The deliberation over eating meat sacrificed to idols becomes the foundation for a larger teaching for Paul. And so, it might be for us as well.

The church in Corinth was in a busy city where trade occurred, and where people of many faiths were located. This pluralistic society created challenges for followers of Christ of how to be in the world, but also set apart from the world in following one's faith. In some respects, that same challenge is something we face in our own context. As one writer says, "For the community in Corinth, the problem is as follows:

once the animals were sacrificed during pagan rituals, the extra meat was sold in markets. As a Christ believer living in Corinth could one buy and eat this meat? Corinth was known in the first century as the quintessential pagan town, and it would have been difficult for Christ believers in Corinth to live in a manner completely separate from the world around them. When Paul deals with the community, he always tries to establish a behavior that takes into account both the fact that the Christ believers live inside the world, but are also clearly separate from it.”<sup>i</sup>

And while these pagan gods are in Corinth, they are not important to Paul, because he believes them to be false idols. For Paul, and other Christ followers, it was enough to believe that these pagan gods were not the true God, so there was no problem eating the meat that had been sacrificed to the pagan gods. There was no meaning for them. Because these gods are not the God Paul worships, there is no guilt or harm in eating the meat.

However, the knowledge that the meat was offered to an idol and not to the true God is not the ultimate criterion that Paul uses to decide how to behave and whether to eat the meat. There is something more to consider. “Paul never conceives of the Christ believer as an independent individual who would take decisions that involve him or herself only. Quite the contrary in fact. For Paul, the Christ believers are first and foremost involved in a community. They are enmeshed in a network of relationships that connect them to other Christ believers. This interconnectedness is precisely the ultimate criterion for Paul. How one’s behavior will influence the behavior of others is paramount.”<sup>ii</sup>

Paul is not laying out some theology in this discussion of knowledge over love. Rather, he is writing to a community he helped form and instructing them in the ways they can be helpful to one another. He is responding to them in a pastoral way. He gives special admonition to those that have knowledge to care for those that are unaware. He tells them not to be a stumbling block. Paul's concern is that if those without knowledge in the faith also eat the meat sacrificed to idols, they may believe there are other gods and idols. He says, therefore, it would be better not to eat the meat at all so that we do not mislead others.

The ultimate criterion for Paul is love in community and checking your own liberty against the needs of others. If your behavior may cause harm to another in your beloved community, even if you think it is harmless to you, out of love, one should curb your own freedom and your behavior to do as you please in order to show support and love for another. You change your behavior so as not to offend or hurt the other. "For Paul, love in the community does not necessarily mean that you have to like the other people in the community, or that you have to agree with what they decide or how they understand the world. Rather you have to modify your own behavior in order to protect them and to make sure that they are not offended by your own behavior."

This, of course, is where it gets tricky. There are issues of authority, knowledge, maturity, offense, freedom, and behavior. It also pulls on our values, what we hold most dear, particularly in our North American context.

Americans hold a strong value of liberty or freedom, "give me liberty or give me death" was one of the many cries that was uttered at the birth of our nation. It's in our DNA. Certainly, it seems, while the majority of people in our own context believe in this freedom, we also believe there are some limits to this freedom, specifically I am free to do what I please

as long as it doesn't harm others. As one saying goes, "my liberty ends at your nose." I am free to do what I will, as long as I do not harm others. But Paul goes further than this. Paul suggests our freedom is more limited.

Paul says love for the other person, particularly the weaker person or person new to the faith, is more important than our own liberty. One writer says, "The criterion to determine what is beneficial is how something will affect the other members of the community. Being right, having the correct knowledge is clearly insufficient to decide which behavior ultimately should be practiced. Knowing is one thing, but choosing the behavior that will not offend the other members of the community is another. And for that only love, understood as deep concern for the other members of the community, can be used."

Again, Paul indicates that he doesn't really care about eating the meat, *except*, for those that are weaker and new to the faith it may be a problem for them, and it may hinder their growth in faith. And for Paul, it is important to note that those with not as much knowledge, or with a weaker conscience, are not equated to having a lesser or weaker faith. Paul is not saying that some are less faithful because they need more help as they learn and mature in faith. Paul is not saying that those with more knowledge are better.

To make this clear, Paul lifts up those that are weak, and focuses on the wrongs done to them by those that are stronger. To harm them is to sin against them as if they are sinning against Christ himself. Scriptural echoes of Matthew 25 equating Christ with the "least of these" can be heard. "Likewise, one might detect a similar connection to the Lord's Prayer's petition for forgiveness from God to be doled out in a measure equal to the forgiveness provided to others."<sup>iii</sup>

Those that have the knowledge have the responsibility to love. “Paul’s solution to this conflict is not to encourage those with a weak conscience to grow more in knowledge and agree that there is only one God. Instead, he asks those with the knowledge to grow in love. He equates offending members of your family... with sinning against them and, moreover, with sinning against Christ (verse 12). It is love that binds and strengthens a community. As Paul puts it, ‘Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.’ Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that the church will be united when those with knowledge are careful in choosing what they can do when they choose to care for siblings with a weak conscience.”<sup>iv</sup>

Again, it gets tricky because if the standard Paul suggests is that we ought not do things even if we have better knowledge because people might get offended – or we need to care for the weaker in faith – well, that’s just fraught with all kinds of difficulty. Who determines who has the good knowledge? Who determines who is weaker? What does that even mean, spiritually weaker? Who, for that matter, determines what might be offensive?

Paul puts two terms in contrast, knowledge and love. Not to say that these are antithetical, but Paul sets love over against a *certain type* of knowledge. Here Paul is not talking about knowledge in general, but rather knowledge that manifests itself in terms of religious arrogance. Paul is deriding those folks who are puffed up in their knowledge. He contrasts this religious arrogance over against love, particularly, self-giving love. It’s a love that builds up the community and strengthens everyone. “The two terms are set against each other: “knowledge” leads to spiritual self-aggrandizement, whereas “love” promotes a healthy, vibrant, spiritual community.”

As one writer says, “Anyone who can only see "how right I am" and does not pause to consider the intrinsic value and worth of those who think, and act differently misunderstands the heart of the gospel. Paul says, "If you have to choose between being loving and being right, be loving... Paul calls us to humility before God and our fellow human beings, to an awareness of the immensity of our own ignorance and the enormous extent of our own capacity to fall into error.”<sup>v</sup>

There are competing demands for our allegiance. There are differences of opinion. What Paul is saying, I believe, is that we must make choices about these allegiances and differences. There are beliefs and things in our culture that may rise to the level of false gods. If Paul were writing a letter to us today, he might warn of wrapping our faith in the flag and nationalism. He might warn about the idols we make of the freedom and right to bear arms so that there are no limits on those individual freedoms. He might write to us about how we in the industrial world make choices that impact the climate and affect other parts of the country more than us. Paul might write to us about tax codes and the accumulation of wealth and the widening gap between the rich and those we make poor. He might write about systems and structures that negatively impact communities of color disproportionately. Paul might write a church so certain about a particular point of theology about LGBTQIA+ people without understanding the harm done by that belief.

Paul challenges us, particularly in those areas where we feel we are most certain, to make sure our certainty isn't manifesting in ways that harm others. Paul challenges us to question where our faith and behavior comes from. Paul challenges us to exercise our freedoms through a lens of love. Is it of God, or some false idol? Ultimately, whatever the behavior or belief, it must always be measured against the impact on others, particularly those that are on the margins.

And friends, lest we get too comfortable, I want to acknowledge that I want to be right. And sometimes when I know I am right, I am not always loving toward those who are “wrong.” This is a word, not just for those other Christians, but for us too. Let us ensure we are building one another up in love. Let us not be stumbling blocks to others, but steppingstones to a deeper faith and community. I frequently remind myself that it is better to be kind and loving than to be right. Let us do all we can to build one another up in love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-corinthians-81-13-3>

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-corinthians-81-13-5>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-corinthians-81-13-6>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-corinthians-81-13#:~:text=Anyone%20who%20can%20only%20see,and%20being%20right%2C%20be%20loving.>