

NEW TESTAMENT READING**1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

¹ 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 [*themselves*]?

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.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

SERMON

So we are kind of unofficially in a sermon series I've named

"Called Out: sermons on discipleship and the church."

Last week we read Mark's account of Jesus' calling of the disciples and discovered that Jesus' call is not so much an appeal to status or safety, but flying in the face of those worldly values, it is a sovereign claim upon our lives, rooted in the conviction that no matter who you are or where you are from or what you've been doing, you belong to God; your life is of value to God.

When the world sees itself rightly, then, it will recognize that every life is valuable.

But the world so rarely sees itself rightly; we make judgements on the inherent value of ourselves and others based on wealth, social status, productivity, charisma, degrees of assimilation into our human-made societies—we so rarely see ourselves as God sees us, and so can frequently be found doing damage to ourselves and our neighbors.

We also mentioned, just in passing last Sunday, that the Greek word we translate *church*, quite literally means *called out ones*—in other words, the church is the community of people who are called out of our worldly state of blindness—our distorted conceptions of reality—and into the “vision,” or, we might say into the “reality” of God. In this sense, our calling is also our salvation, for to see and be seen as God sees is to be freed from the distorting power of sin. But more than this, our calling enlists us as participants in God's ongoing work of salvation for all people—indeed, for the whole world. This is what we mean by that word *discipleship*—it is the particular calling of the church to see the world as God sees

it, through the lens and after the activity of Jesus, and thus participate in the salvation that comes through him.

This morning's passage from 1 Corinthians is not quite so straight forward for modern readers. It's concerned with some pretty culturally obscure issues, far too easy to gloss over as irrelevant to the modern church—I mean, how many people still make animal sacrifices to their gods? Certainly not enough to sell the meat wholesale at Costco!

So, we might wonder, what could a 2000 year old argument between Christians in ancient Greece, about whether or not to eat 'idol meat' possibly have to do with a church in South Sacramento, or with the discipleship of its members in the year 2018? That's what this sermon series is supposed to be about, after all—the church and discipleship as it concerns us *today*.

But while the world has changed quite dramatically in 2000 years, the people in it, in many ways, have not. People are still people.

Consider the members of First Corinthian Church. Living in a cosmopolitan city, they come from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds—there are immigrants, 2nd, 3rd, maybe even 4th generation Jews, mixed with native Greeks and Romans. It wasn't Athens, by any means, but thanks to an important canal along the trade route, Corinth was bustling with merchants from all over the world.

Because Greco-Roman religion was polytheistic, and by nature quite tolerant, it was easy enough to bring your own gods with you to Corinth, and no one got offended if you sacrificed to a different god than they did in the pagan temples. Even the Jews weren't bothered by this reality—their monotheism wasn't

something to be imposed on other people, and as far as they were concerned none of those pagan gods really existed anyhow, so what harm could there really be in buying a steak from the local market that may have been sacrificed to this or that god; or attending a festival or banquet held in honor of this or that god?

Especially for those in positions of high social standing, appearances at such events would have been expected, and so we can imagine their deliberations:

My friendly, Athenian neighbors invited me to join them for a banquet honoring Apollo, and though I personally don't ascribe any honor to Apollo, it would be rude to say no.

Well, Apollo is just a made up name for a god that doesn't exist; therefore, I say, no god, no harm, no foul. Let us eat, drink and be merry, Jew and Gentile alike!

For we who fashion ourselves slightly more progressive Christians—congregations who have a long history of involvement in groups with names like South Sacramento Interfaith Partnership—these are precisely the kinds of values we generally celebrate: tolerance, diversity, cooperation. And I believe with all my heart that we are right and faithful to celebrate them!

But there is another opinion present in First Corinthian Church. True diversity in a church virtually guarantees that there will be differences of opinion—cultural and theological disagreements—and the early church, so often idealized in our recollections of it, was no exception.

Consider, for instance, the Greek, formerly Pagan converts to Christianity, worshiping alongside the lifelong monotheist Jewish Christians of First Corinthian Church.

For the Greeks, Apollo is *not* just some silly idol, as the Jews believed, but has been an object of true and devoted worship, depended upon as a source of prophecy, healing, and all the other things we depend on our gods to provide. Apollo could be worshiped and prayed to alongside any number of other gods, but now having come to faith in Jesus as the definitive revelation of the One True God—the God of Israel—Apollo along with all the rest had to be abandoned. To the recently converted Pagan, no banquet to Apollo can be harmless, for it beckons to the former life, unchanged by Jesus, and contrary to faith in him as the Christ.

So it is the Greek Christians, you see—who understand themselves to have been graciously plucked from a life of superstition and idolatry—who insist that no meat sacrificed to idols may be eaten, no pagan temples may be visited, and no leniency may be given in this matter! Watching Jewish Christians in the congregation treat idol meat as if it were harmless makes no sense to the disaffected Apollo worshiper turned Christian; to him it is nothing less than an acceptance of the idolatry from which he had just been saved!

Well ... what are we to do here?

On the one hand, tolerance and cooperation are virtues we find to be faithful. On the other, there have always been and will always be Christians for whom too much tolerance in certain areas would be truly destructive to their faith.

During college, I was elected president of a new campus ministry geared toward members of fraternities and sororities. Mostly, people who actively engage their faith during the college years are really quite serious about it, which oftentimes translates into their being somewhat moralistic. There were a number of

participants in this ministry, for instance, who really shunned the consumption of alcohol, especially by their fellow Christians.

Well, I quite enjoyed the newly opened Belgian beer bar down the road from campus, and could find no good reason that one teetotaler's personal convictions about alcohol should be thrust upon all the rest of us, and so decided to use my position of influence to make a point. At social functions where other Christians were around, I would always be sure to have a beer in hand. I told myself, of course, that this was a noble exercise of my presidency—a kind of righteous display of the freedom Christians have to enjoy life, to appreciate the master craftsmanship of Belgian brewers, to not get too caught up with what we eat and drink—after all, Jesus certainly didn't seem to mind a popping the cork on a bottle of wine, and with some frequency it no less—so why shouldn't we?!? In fact, I really kind of enjoyed when it appeared to scandalize the other Christians in the room—it made me feel edgy and cool.

This was—if I may engage in dramatic understatement—*not* Paul's response when he received a letter from his old congregation asking him to weigh in on their debate over idol meat.

The apostle begins by throwing some snark at his fellow Jewish Christians—these are the, perhaps ironically 'strong' in faith:

'I understand that you think you know everything, and the things you think you know, you think everyone ought to be expected to know ... but all this knowledge has a tendency to puff up—to become self-righteous and inconsiderate of the experiences of others. Love, on the other hand,' Paul says, *'builds up a community of faith.'*

It may be the case—in fact, it *IS* the case—that Apollo is just a name, and no god at all; that food and drink does not bring us closer to, or keep us farther from the True God … but what have we really gained by this knowledge if it is used to foster spiteful *division*, rather than loving *communion* in the body of Christ?

Christ—Paul reminds—who gave up much more than a preferred diet, or a well-maintained social calendar … Christ who died for those believers some may regard as weak—or as lacking knowledge, and for whom the self-described “stronger” in faith wouldn’t even give up their luxuries.

“…by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”

It’s not that the strong are wrong, you see—it’s not that progressive convictions or conservative convictions are right or wrong—it’s that they miss the point of Christ’s calling.

New Testament scholar Richard Hays is certain that

“Every congregation will profit from looking at themselves in the mirror of 1 Corinthians 8 and asking whether there are ways in which we are using knowledge as a weapon rather than as an instrument of love. Whether Bible-thumping certainty about revealed truth, or serene confidence in the latest scientific findings, or passionate discernment of the “right” social causes, any “knowledge” that divides the community and causes the knowledgeable ones to despise those who are ignorant or uncertain is not being used in the service of God.”

Or as Paul puts it:

*"Anyone who claims to know something does not yet know rightly;
but anyone who loves God is known by God."*

See, it is not our knowledge—not even our knowledge of God, that makes us knew, but God's knowing us.

The Christian's primary responsibility in this world is not knowledge, but love.

Love trumps knowledge. Love trumps freedom.

Love trumps doctrine. Love trumps rightness.

Because only love has the power to recreate the world as God originally intended it—as God sees it still, for God is Love, the lens through which we rightly see the world.

Now, it is true that we have not solved all of the ethical problems that could be read into this passage. If we amend our behavior to accommodate every sincerely held religious belief, for instance, how will the church ever take a stand on controversial issues such as landed Jesus on a Roman cross and sent his family and disciples running for a safer creed?

Surely Paul does not intend the church to be held hostage by its most narrow-minded and legalistic members.

He does not. But that which is readily made into a god in our world—things like wealth, power, self-gratification—for the love of our sisters and brothers in Christ we nail to the cross with him, confident that love has no greater than this: that we lay down our lives for our friends.

Grant us a strength greater than our own, O God, that we may do for others as you have done for us all. Amen.