

4th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
January 28, 2024

1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Love Builds Up

Grace and peace to you from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

The Steelers lost in the playoffs but I still watch the games. What has caught my attention this year is what happens immediately after the game is over. While the crowds are going crazy for the winning team, the players on both sides stay on the field and do this exchange. We are not privy to what they say to each other but it looks as if the ones that lost are congratulating the winners, and the ones that won are not rubbing it in but rather speaking words of encouragement. Even on the football field love builds up.

Today it is going to be all about love. 1 Corinthians 13 is where Paul outlines the benefits of love but it is in our text for today that we get a practical example of how love works. It is not as easy as it sounds. To do the most loving act takes some prayerful thought and a heavy dose of wisdom.

We start by breaking down what is taking place in 1 Corinthians 8. In Corinth, once the animals were sacrificed to idols then the extra meat was sold in the markets. Some of the early Christians, who claimed to have special knowledge when it came to spiritual matters, knew they were free to eat those leftover foods without feeling guilty. After all, idols were not real. Idols had no authority over them because there was only one God.

Paul could not agree more with those smart and intelligent Christians. However, there was one more thing for them to consider. While they were buying up the extra meat at the market, there was another group of new Christians off to the side who still considered eating that food a form of idol worship. At least in their minds, eating the idol food was somehow abandoning their commitment to Christ. They believed that they would fall into temptation and become defiled not by *what* they ate, but *because* they ate those foods.

Paul did not believe that those idols had any real power over them. But it was clear that he was not indifferent to those new to the faith. It certainly was a big deal to some of the early Christians. They had just emerged out of the world of gods and idols and were still unsure of what it meant to be in the kingdom of God. Paul was letting the *know-it-alls* know that every decision made by a Christian had to be within the context of the larger community (whether it be among their church family or in their own homes).

What I love about this lesson is that Paul was far more concerned for those who were still working through the issue of one God versus a plurality of gods than those who already got it. Paul gave them space to process what they saw when the other Christians consumed food offered to idols. Paul was showing an incredible amount of pastoral care for them. He did not want the freedom of the elite to threaten the faith of those who were not there yet.

The issue was never about food. Paul is even stronger in his language when he insists that believers who use their freedom to do whatever they deem *right* also have the responsibility to refrain from such behaviors if it will negatively affect the faith of others. They will not make the community stronger but will tear it down. Although one may possess knowledge, it also requires an ethic of love and self-sacrifice.

It is a humbling lesson for all of us to hear (myself included). All that we know about God and the relationship that God has with his people should not make us insensitive to those who do not share our insights. Love does the opposite. Love builds up. Love builds up the people who are in the *know* and love especially builds up the people who are still working out how God works in this world.

I hope by now we all realize that this thing called *love* is not as easy as it sounds. To do the most loving act takes some prayerful thought and a heavy dose of wisdom.

In 1 Corinthians 13 we hear that love does not insist on its own way. We acknowledge the importance of knowing God and knowing the freedom we have in Christ. We also acknowledge that ultimately what must determine our behavior is our love for one another.

We are not free to think only of our own response to a situation. We have to take in account those affected by our actions. Love welcomes those with different viewpoints to be one with Christ. Love urges that everyone be taken seriously. Love insists that we listen to one another, really listen, not in order to correct one another but in order to learn from each other.

As a pastor I am often asked to help people think things through so they can make good and loving decisions. It can be a conversation about relationships, health concerns, or end-of-life issues. And all of these conversations are not just about the person sitting in my office. Conversations about relationships and health concerns and end-of-life issues affect whole families. We are all enmeshed in a network of relationships that connect us to each other. It is taking others into consideration that often determines ultimately what is the most loving act.

Our freedom in Christ is to be celebrated. It also means we may have to modify our behavior or change our minds in order to bring others along.

Please do not hear this morning that we need to surrender the truths we know about God that are part of our faith. We are called to hold our convictions but always with humility. What we are hearing today is that it is more important to be loving than to be right. At home and in our work place and especially in the church, we need to commit ourselves to the love that builds up. It means we see diversity as a gift from God. It means we understand that we need one another to discern the will of God more fully.

Our freedom is grounded in God's love which means relationships are just as important in our decision making and behavior as are the facts of the situation. Paul came down very hard on those who justified their behavior on the basis of theological arguments (even arguments with which he agreed). He went so far as to state that he would become a vegetarian for the rest of his life (if necessary) rather than harm those who would be hurt by his eating idol meat.

In Scripture God tells us all the things we should or should not do. We know that this list does not cover everything that concerns us in our world. Paul is letting us know that being certain of what is right

or wrong (appropriate or inappropriate) is not sufficient (even if our position is deemed correct because of our years of theological study). Paul is letting us know that love for the sake of others is what guides our actions. It is not as easy as it sounds. To do the most loving act takes some prayerful thought and a heavy dose of wisdom.

As for the upcoming football games this afternoon, I will watch to the very end not to see the fans cheer for the winning team but to see both teams walk back on the field to congratulate and encourage. Even on the football field love builds up. Amen