

4th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
January 31, 2021

Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Theme: Love Builds Up

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

Seniors in seminary are preparing themselves for the final steps they need to take before their last approval process. Once that is behind them then they need to fill out their ministry profiles that will be sent to churches who are looking to call a new pastor. It is a long and tedious process but the end result is worth it. Finally seminarians reach the point of flying solo.

We learn so much in seminary and on internship that we enter our first call with confidence in our abilities to tackle anything that comes our way. We can lead worship. We can preach and teach. We can care for our members. And we cannot wait for those deep theological questions that will assure our members that they chose the right pastor to serve them.

It has been over 25 years now but I still remember the first question I was asked by a member. It was my first Sunday and I just delivered my first sermon to my new church. A woman came up to me after the service and asked if she could speak to me privately. I was pumped. I was sure she wanted to ask me something about the content of my sermon. Instead she said this: I often go to the casinos. When I win some money I want to give some of it to the church. The other pastor told me no. What do you think?

What pastors learn with experience is that people are not as concerned about those deep theological questions as they are about the practical. When in doubt they want someone to tell them exactly what to do and they will keep asking until they get the answer they want to hear. But it is in the practical that we discover the heart of a deeper theological issue. In this case did the woman want to know if her offering (no matter where it came from) was acceptable in the eyes of God? Or did she want to know if she would be judged because of her behavior?

In our lesson from 1 Corinthians Paul was asked whether or not it was okay for Christians to eat the meat offered to idols. Eating meat sacrificed to idols hardly seemed like an earthshattering concern. But (as it turned out) it was a big deal. In the Corinthian church many of the members who were well-educated and relatively sophisticated were smart enough to know that idols did not exist except in the minds of the unbelievers. Plus it was Paul (himself) who taught them that they were free from such laws. They were not bound by rules and regulations that did not pertain to God. They were bound only to Christ.

Here was the concern: Some members of the Corinthian church were acquiring the meat from meat markets – meat that had been put there after the sacrifices were made at the temple for idols. It was available to the public and was meant to be used in the homes of the people. But other members objected to eating this meat.

Like the member from my first parish, the Corinthians approached Paul and said: We just got back from the meat market. When we buy this meat we want to prepare it for our friends from church. But not everyone wants to eat it. We know it is okay so why do they refuse?

The well-educated members of the Corinthian church were correct. Paul could not deny their logic. Christians were free to eat idol foods. Paul taught them that food had no impact on their salvation, idols did not exist on their own, and Christians were free from such laws. They came to the right conclusion. Paul now needed to teach them a new lesson. There was one more thing to take into consideration when they lived out their new freedom. Christians had to weigh the ethical implications of what they did.

We learn that the members of the Corinthian church were made up of not only the elite but there were ordinary working people in the faith community who recently came from those very temples set aside for idols. When those people saw the other members purchase the meat and then serve it to them, it was too great of a burden. It threatened their faith. It drew them back to their idolatrous ways which were still fresh in their minds. Paul (in good conscience) could not side with the ones who ate idol meat over against the ones who were doing their best to refrain from doing that very thing.

Our freedom in Christ does not give us the right to do as we wish. We cannot just set aside the restrictions that no longer pertain to us without thought of how our behaviors will affect others. 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 all those areas of the church that concern us. It is why we have such major debates about issues like same-gender relationships, abortion, the death penalty, ethnicity, racism, and even gambling that are all addressed in the ELCA Social Statements. When God does not tell us exactly what to do then we are left to prayerfully determine if we have the freedom to do so (or not).

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 is greater than our puffed up knowledge. Love for the sake of the community is what should guide our actions. We need to modify our behaviors to ensure that the faith of another is not weakened. We are to show reconciling love. We are to guard the integrity of the church and to do so in such a way that members who are not yet where we are in our understanding of the gospel will not fall away. In the end this is about our loyalty to Christ. Knowledge without love puffs up and makes us feel much more important than we are. We are to make room for love in order to build up.

We go back to the hallway of the church where the member wanted to know what I thought about the money she collected at the casinos. Was it an acceptable offering or not? My quick answer was to say yes (we would receive her financial gift). But I added (with a smile) that she should not come to the church asking us to cover any losses.

One pastor said it was not okay and I said otherwise.
Who was right?

In our social statements we say that small wagers in friendly games of chance are essentially harmless. Did her time at the casinos bear the same spirit as gambling or not? Over time we built a relationship with each other that enabled us to talk about the deeper theological issues that surrounded her question. We talked about how our behaviors matter for the sake of our own well-being and for the sake of others. It is what it means to be in Christ. Amen