

Doing The Right Thing

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

February 1, 2009

I.

Today's readings offer good choices for sermons. Mark's story about Jesus casting out a demon was one of the first Gospel descriptions of his extraordinary power and authority. It also shows that evil spiritual forces in this world know exactly who Jesus is. In regrettable contrast to evil, however, many of God's children are comfortable in their worldly knowledge and do seek Jesus' in their lives.

This tendency to rely on our own knowledge to the spiritual detriment of ourselves or others is something I would like to explore further. The reading from First Corinthians presents an opportunity to deal with that question, and it tells us that sometimes we are called to put the interests of others ahead of our own rights and privileges.

But before we begin, it would be helpful to establish context, make some distinctions, and review some background to help us grasp St. Paul's meaning when he wrote this letter to the fledgling church at Corinth. Let's start with the background, which has three parts.

First, this letter was written about twenty years after the crucifixion. At that time Corinth was the commercial center and crossroads of Greece. It had about 250,000 free people, and perhaps twice as many slaves. That's bigger than Jackson, and with the slaves it was bigger than Atlanta.

Corinth was a typical Greek city in which philosophy, wisdom, and knowledge were valued. It also was a melting pot for people from different places and cultures who brought their pagan practices and gods with them, and many of those gods and practices became established in the lives of the Corinthian people. Sacrifices, debauchery, and boisterous feasts were common.

The city also was known for its rampant immorality. The temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, for example, was in Corinth. At one time it was estimated that over one thousand prostitutes served in the temple. It was so bad that the Greeks coined a verb, "to Corinthianize," as a way to describe immoral activity.

The second background item is the Greek practice of sacrificing animals and making offerings to the various gods they worshipped. This was similar to Jewish sacrifices described in the Old Testament, except that these Jewish offerings were commanded in Scripture by God. Greek sacrifices to idols, however, were beyond Scripture and condemned by both Jews and Christians.

And the third background item is that when these sacrifices and offerings of animals and food were made, there usually was a lot left over. The quantity actually consumed in the sacrifice was small. The person who offered the sacrifice often hosted a feast in the temple to use the rest.

In this setting, Paul wrote his letter in response to a letter from the Corinthian church asking several questions (7:1). And one of those questions was whether it was permissible for Christians to attend these pagan feasts and eat food, principally meat, that had been sacrificed or offered to idols. Would they be engaging in idolatry if they did?

II.

Good question. Let's look at the reading. Paul began by describing two different types of knowledge. This placed the matter within a familiar Greek context. He made a distinction between arrogant or prideful knowledge, and knowledge of the truth expressed in love.

And this distinction was at the foundation of his response to the Corinthian church's letter on this question. Paul concluded that since idols had no meaningful existence, then food offered to those idols could not be affected or spiritually tainted by something that did not exist. He said that the food itself was morally and spiritually neutral, but that the knowledge and beliefs people had on the question was important. This worked two ways.

At one level, Paul recognized there were strong Christians who understood his rationale that food offered to meaningless idols was not corrupted, and he acknowledged that they could go ahead and eat it without fear of idol worship since they knew the truth. To them it was just a meal.

But Paul also was concerned about the effect this could have on what he called weak Christians who, for example, might recently have come to Christ and still remembered their pagan days when they gave reverence to idols. He worried that as they were trying to become faithful Christians, they might not yet understand Paul's reasoning on this question, and could be misled by learning that other respected Christians ate food offered to idols.

Let me be more specific. Paul foresaw that if these weaker Christians knew that stronger Christians were eating food leftover from offerings to idols, then the weak Christians might be tempted to do the same even though they believed, mistakenly, that it was wrong. This, then, Paul worried, could diminish their sense of obedience, and they could fall into the habit of doing other things they also thought were wrong, and that actually were wrong.

Paul expressed this problem in Romans when he said, "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall" (14:20-21).

Thus, the question addresses the circumstances of when Christians should do things they know they have a right to do and are not wrong in and of themselves, but that when seen by others might be misunderstood and be harmful to the development of their faith. In terms of a modern phrase that actually was coined by the Roman statesman Cicero, and later used by Shakespeare in Henry IV, when is discretion the better part of valor?

Here's an example to illustrate the question. For many years as a lawyer I believed the death penalty served some valid purposes. But now I'm a priest, and I have to ask myself whether I still should express that view. I realize that some people might feel less comfortable about the church if they saw priests running around favoring the death penalty. And so in this case I could feel called to subordinate my opinions to the expectations of others about how priests should behave. I do not think doing so would be hypocritical, but rather consistent with Paul's advice.

III.

I hope by now we have an idea of Paul's intent when he wrote this letter. But it's also important to clearly discern the parameters of his meaning. We are called to take this reading for what it is, and neither apply it where it was not intended, nor fail to apply it where applicable.

So, let's go a little deeper and consider some distinctions, the first of which is the two different types of knowledge Paul mentioned in the reading. One type goes like this. "I know what is right and wrong. I'm a good Christian and I'll do what I think is right. If others don't understand, that's their problem." Here's the other type. "I know I have a right to do these things, but I also know that others might misunderstand and get the wrong impression and be misled. I don't want anyone to be misled, and so I won't do these things even though I can."

Paul labeled these two types of knowledge for us. One is expressed in pride, and "puffs up." The other is expressed in love, and "builds up." I think it's easy to see which is which.

Another distinction is that Paul's message is limited to how we deal with other Christians and those who might become Christians, even though the idea of caring for others is all-inclusive. Paul does not call upon us, for example, to refrain from drinking coffee in the presence of Mormons, or to avoid eating pork in the presence of Jews or Muslims.

And finally, it's important to understand Paul's work and the context in which he wrote. There are at least two aspects. On one hand, Paul and the apostles were traveling around the region teaching the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. That message was proclaimed as the eternal and unchanging truth without regard to whether or not it was popular, and without regard to whether or not it was contrary to existing beliefs or practices. The Gospel is the Gospel.

But on the other hand, Paul and the apostles also were trying to start and nurture local church congregations as they went from city to city. And in this work, unlike the task of spreading the Gospel, Paul found himself dealing local customs and traditions as he encountered competing factions, disorderly worship practices, cultural differences, and internal church battles.

And even though Paul viewed the individual churches as part of one larger church, he also knew that these churches needed guidance on their own unique situations. This meant that while the Gospel applied to everyone everywhere for all time, his advice to individual churches on local issues, even though inspired by the Holy Spirit, might not have universal applicability.

Thus, as we read any of Paul's letters to the various churches, we should distinguish between the eternal unchanging Gospel that applies to all, and matters of individual church operations that might be treated differently in different places at different times.

IV.

When we apply these distinctions to today's reading, we can see that Paul's instructions fall into the second category of local issues. The situation in Corinth was not universally duplicated in other cities, and does not even apply to us today. Paul was not teaching the Gospel in this part of his letter to the Corinthian Christians, but rather was advising them as they struggled in a pagan world.

But our inquiry does not end there. Although we do not look to this teaching as guidance about what kind of food we can or should eat, we can find a larger principle inherent in it. Paul's words also guide us in how we care about the faith of our fellow Christians. We are called to understand this reading in the context of the relationships we have with those around us, and how we conduct ourselves as Christians who want to invite others into the faith.

But we cannot be true to that concern if we pridefully puff ourselves up because of who we are or what we think we know. We do it instead by extending ourselves to others in loving appreciation of their circumstances, so that instead of being puffed up we can build up. We take their interests into account as we think about our own.

This reminds me of the story about the priest who was given an award for humility in serving his congregation. He had it framed and hung it on his office wall. Doesn't that illustrate an ever-present aspect of our flawed human nature?

In the end, we walk a very fine line between vanity and humility, between pride in ourselves and love of others. As Paul said later in this letter, "Love does not insist on its own way (13:5). Winning the argument sometimes is not as important as the relational issues at stake. Sometimes it is not just a matter of being right, but doing the right thing. *Amen.*