

Freedom to Love
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Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God. So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall. – 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, NIV

So, what is Paul talking about these unusual verses that mentioned food sacrificed to idols? A few years ago, right before Thanksgiving, both our daughters shared with us that they were now vegans, which if you don't know generally means they did not eat anything that contained animal products. I think they were doing this to give us a heads up as we prepared for Thanksgiving dinner when they returned home to visit, which was nice of them to do. Pam had been preparing Thanksgiving dinner a certain way for many years, and it was always good with the traditional foods, but it was not vegan. So, because we love our daughters, we figured out ways to adapt to their new diet. Some of our traditional casseroles Pam was able to change and leave out some animal products. We still had the traditional turkey, but our daughters created a lentil loaf which was interesting, at least from my perspective. But I had some of it and it seemed to meet the needs of our daughters. So, is that the kind of thing Paul is talking about in this unusual passage we have just read from his letter to the church at Corinth? In some ways I think it is, but in other ways it's a little different because the context of Paul's letter is different.

You may remember that Paul had a conversation on the road to Damascus in which he heard the voice of the risen Christ, and it changed his life forever. In time, he felt called to share the good news of the gospel and God's love in Jesus Christ with the Gentiles, even though he was Jewish. Paul was uniquely qualified to do this, not only because of his profound knowledge of his own Jewish tradition, but because he had an equally deep understanding of the philosophical thought in his Greco-Roman world. So, Paul went off to share the good news primarily with Gentiles, which resulted in people believing and the creation of new churches. Corinth was an example of one of these churches he started. It probably had no more than 50 people, but this letter is

addressing some very practical issues they were facing as they were trying to live out the gospel together as followers of Jesus Christ.

As Paul begins talking about food sacrificed to idols, he first quotes a maxim from his day, “We all possess knowledge.” It doesn't sound very catchy in English, but maybe it was better in Greek. However, he follows this up by saying “knowledge puffs up while love builds up.” For Paul, it is important that we think about the things we know about God and love -- before we think about practical things -- which in Paul's case had to do with food sacrificed to idols. So, Paul reminds them that knowledge can “puff up” and if used for the wrong reasons, can lead us to make wrong choices in life. Paul says, “knowledge puffs up while love builds up.” Knowledge, without the moral compass of love, will not in itself always lead us to make the right decisions in life. In fact, we may even use our knowledge to justify decisions we make that are primarily focused on us and what we want, with little regard for others.

Paul's context in Corinth is this: there was an actual meat market where they sold meat. Corinth was a large city of about 80,000 on an isthmus -- that narrow strip of land between two seas. There were always plans to try to dig a canal connecting the two seas, which was finally completed in 1923. Because it was only a few miles across, some ships would be taken out of the water from one sea and transported across land, instead of sailing all the way around Greece. It was like a seaport town and there were people from all over the world, though it was settled with Roman citizens and soldiers who had some kind of status. There were also Jews living there who had fled Jerusalem during times of persecution.

Most of the time, when the meat was purchased in the meat market, it was dedicated to one of the local gods, with the family perhaps having the meat prepared and eating it there onsite. But the leftover meat was sold in the market. Everyone knew it had been “sacrificed” to other gods or idols. In that early church in Corinth, Paul apparently had new Christians who were struggling with whether they should eat meat purchased in the meat market because it had been sacrificed to idols. They were now followers of Jesus the Christ and worshiped the one true God. So, it was a very practical issue they had to deal with. It is the kind of issue anyone who starts a new church has to deal with. Our Session has to deal with practical issues which may have some Biblical, theological, and ethical implications to them. Many times, those of us who are pastors have been trained in these things. We raise these kinds of questions so our Session can try to discern what the right thing is to do.

Paul begins by saying that from a Christian perspective we believe there is only one God who is revealed through Jesus Christ. Jesus came in the flesh, lived, was crucified, and rose from the dead. And now the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, continues to work in the lives of those who follow Christ, as well as in the world. So, for Paul, there are in reality no other gods who may be worshipped through idols.

However, Paul also realizes there are still idols and those who worship other gods through idols. That is causing a problem for those he calls the ones with a “weak conscience” or simply the “weak.” These appear to be new believers as perhaps most of those in Corinth were. They were not those who have done anything wrong or are bad. These were simply those who were not yet mature in the Christian faith. In the same way that we would not say that a child or a young

person is a “bad” adult, but only not yet mature -- we would also say that these Christians who are struggling are simply not yet mature. Maybe Paul would add that they do not yet have the knowledge or the experience that comes with being a Christian for a period of time. But Paul writes to those who should know better -- those who are mature in the faith.

In regard to whether or not those who know better should eat food sacrificed to idols, Paul says this: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” Paul’s word of caution to those who are more mature, focuses on the fact that they do have what he calls “rights.” Here, Paul is picking up a theme that he returns to again and again in his letters -- freedom and what it means to be free. For Paul, freedom in Christ is freedom from being enslaved to sin. The idea is that we are all slaves to sin, which means we all end up doing things that are wrong and that we shouldn’t do that hurt ourselves and others. And we are unable to stop doing this on our own. The “big problem” in the world is sin and brokenness, so God sends Jesus to do something about it. It’s why Jesus died on the cross, which Paul talks about later in this letter, noting that Christ died for everyone -- even the weak brother or sister whom Paul says may be “destroyed” by how we use our knowledge and the choices that we make.

So, freedom is not only freedom from sin. It is also freedom to use our knowledge gained through learning and experience in life, in order to make the right choices, not only for ourselves, but choices that will affect others. In short, it is freedom to do the right thing and not become, as Paul describes it, a “stumbling block” to the weak. The Greek word for stumbling block is skandalon -- from which we get our English word “scandal.” As Christians we are given the freedom to choose, but our choices matter -- not only how they affect us, but how they affect those around us.

As we said earlier, Paul was addressing some very practical things in that early church in Corinth. So, how might this passage from scripture speak to us today? Is there some practical situation these words may address -- perhaps something complex or even somewhat controversial? This week we looked at this passage in the Bible study I lead. Now, I already had an idea of what I planned to say in this sermon, but I asked these same questions to our Bible study, wondering if I was going to have to ask more leading questions to go where I think I planned to go with this sermon. When I asked the simple question, “What might this speak to today?” -- one of our members said pretty quickly one word – “masks.”

My guess is that the anxiety level of most of us just went up. Masks and vaccines have become fairly controversial issues in our day in time. They are even controversial issues in the church. Now I know this is hard to talk about, but please stay with me on this and please stay open to what God’s Spirit may be saying to all of us through these words of scripture.

A few months ago, our Session was wrestling with a number of things related to when and how we might safely return to worship. This was before we started the drive-in service and were only doing the online service. So, we were talking about when we might come back and meet, how we might come back and meet and in what form, and what would be the requirements so that we could do this safely for all of our church members.

The discussion was lively and vigorous, which is OK. The reason why we have a Session in the Presbyterian Church is so that we might have different perspectives shared respectfully, in order that we might discern, as best we can, God's will for our church. It is not about my will or the will of any particular elder or group in the church. As a Session, we meet to discern the will of God. And as our Book of Order reminds us, we don't always get it right -- we may even "err" sometimes, as it says in our Book of Order. But the hope is that a group of elders are more likely if they are open, to discern the will of God than just any one person -- even if that person is the pastor.

So, as we talked about it, we got to the point where we were saying that if we had services on campus, whether that be drive-in, on the church lawn in socially distanced circles, or in person, would we require the wearing of masks? As you might imagine, different perspectives were shared -- some with great passion. I let it go for a while so that a number of perspectives could be shared. After a while, it got to the point where I thought it was important for me to share my perspective about what I think we needed to consider. I made reference to this passage that we have talked about this morning. I felt that if there was one passage that spoke to the challenges we face about wearing masks and even getting vaccines, this was the passage for me.

I believe that Paul seems to be saying here and other places, that while we may have the right or the freedom to do something, if it is a stumbling block to someone who is weaker, then he tells us to use our freedom to choose to do something that will be what is best for our "weaker" brother or sister. And I believe that when it comes to the wearing of masks and getting vaccines that would not only protect our health, but would more importantly help those most vulnerable and weak in our community in our world -- as Christians we should wear masks and get vaccines out of love for one another.

We have the freedom to choose. We may even refer to this using the same word as Paul does, "rights" -- but what we do with that freedom and those rights has a moral dimension to it. So, as your pastor, I want to invite and encourage all of us to wear masks whenever it could help those around us, and to get our vaccines as soon as possible, unless there is some medical or other circumstance that would prevent that.

When it comes to how we use our knowledge, Paul focuses on the importance of love which builds up. Maybe another word that describes all of this is humility. As I mentioned in my Reflections blog this week, after we lost Hank Aaron, I read an article about how the Atlanta Hawks, our NBA team, had been visited by Hank Aaron a few years ago and how much it meant to them. I also mentioned that Dominique Wilkins, one of the Hawks greatest players of all time, was also interviewed and he talked about how Hank Aaron had taken him under his wing when he was a young, rising star. This is what Wilkins said about Aaron:

"One of the things I remember him saying is, 'You have to set an example for people to come after you.' How do you do that? You do it the right way," Wilkins said of Aaron's message to him. "You do it by having humility and doing it the right way, and the right thing sometimes is hard. . . . The give-back aspect that I learned has come from the Aaron family." . . . Wilkins said. "Everyone knows what he did as an athlete, but I want people to know as a person how loving and how sweet of a guy he was."

Humility and love. Aaron had great knowledge about baseball – not only hitting but 00080 fielding and running the bases. His baseball knowledge led him to being one of greatest players of all time. But if you listened for the tributes to Aaron this week, in addition to his baseball feats, they talked about the challenges he had to endure because of racism, to the point of even receiving death threats. But right after that, most people talked about the impact he had on the lives of others, and they often talked about how he cared for people -- his love -- and his humility. Aaron used what he had been given to build up others, which is Paul's description of love here – love builds up. So, may we each choose to use our freedom to do what is right, and to use our knowledge to show the love of Christ -- especially to those who are weak, struggling, or vulnerable -- as our way to build each other up.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.