

2024 Epiphany 4B

There are times when I would really like to interrupt one of the readers, turn to all of you and ask, “Is this making *any* sense to you?”

The reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is one such passage. All this stuff about food sacrificed to idols but not really sacrificed to idols and being puffed up by knowledge and never eating meat. Could any of you make sense out of that?

I want to spend some time, today, talking about what is going on in this passage. I know I’m in danger of losing some of you to boredom or confusion, but I’m going to ask that you hang in here with me. This about so much more than food. Paul is taking advantage of an argument they’re having to make a point about something much more serious, much more vital to the well-being of the whole community.

So what is the argument? Why are they arguing about food? Actually, it’s more specific than that. They are arguing about meat. (If any of you are vegetarians, you’re probably loving this right now)

Paul, like most early Christians, lived in Greco-Roman society. In that world, the established religion was NOT Christianity, it was worship of a whole array of gods: Jupiter and Hera, Athena and Mercury and Apollo...does any of this sound familiar? Roman worship was not just a private religious observance, it was all tied up with civic duty and responsibility. You know that early Christians ended up in trouble with Rome because of their religion. What you may

not realize is that it was as much about being perceived as revolutionaries, a threat to the social order, even traitors. As time went on, they were forced to choose and many, many Christians died. It probably wasn't quite to the boiling point in Paul's time, although he was one of many early martyrs for the faith. As Paul was writing this letter to the church in Corinth in Greece, the Christians were still trying to walk a tightrope between their faith and their society.

So what does food, and in particular meat, have to do with navigating these difficult straits?

Meat was a luxury in those days, and much of the meat that was available began as sacrifices to those gods I mentioned. I read in one commentary that slaughterhouses were often located next to temples. (Lest you be too grossed out, remember that our own tradition has its roots in Judaism, where the animals were slaughtered IN the Temple.) The animals would be slaughtered, certain parts of the animals would be burned in sacrifice to the gods, and the remainder would be distributed to the priests and worshipers or sold in the market. People would buy this meat, gather their friends and families for a banquet at their homes and have a feast to honor the god in whose name it had been sacrificed. (*Interpreter's Concise Dictionary*) Meat was expensive. For many of the poorer people, this was the only way they could get meat into their diet. Their choices were to eat meat that had been part of a religious ceremony or to go without.

The Jewish community had long before been given permission to slaughter their own animals, because they considered it sacrilegious, idolatrous, to eat meat sacrificed to any god but their own to be. The pattern was the same, though. They burned parts of the animal, they gave some of

the leftover meat to the priests and sold the rest, to the Jewish community that couldn't eat the pagan meat. Those Christians who had converted from Judaism could obtain this meat without any qualms. But those Christians who had converted from pagan religion didn't have the same access to that food, and frequently found themselves in social situations where it was either accept the menu or go hungry. (*Harper Bible Commentary*)

This question of eating meat was the surface issue of a deeper division that needed to be addressed in the church in Corinth. This was a community that was formed around their belief in the Good News of Jesus Christ, but the backgrounds from which they came were very diverse. Cultural differences bubbled beneath the surface. There were people of different social rank, some very wealthy and some very poor. It was largely a community of converts from pagan religions, people who placed a great deal of value on philosophy and secret knowledge known only to those who were "inside" the circle. But there were also those who had converted from Judaism, who held dearly to the idea that God was not an idea to which one may subscribe, but a God to be loved and adored—and obeyed. A tension between knowing God intellectually and knowing God emotionally.

There were clashes between those who had been Christians for a long time and those who were very newly converted. The newly converted had lots of new energy and hope, but they also hadn't developed ways to cope with the challenges of living as a Christian in pagan society. The older converts had worked through all those growing pains, but were susceptible to complacency or staleness. Both sides thought they knew something the other side didn't, which

showed up as a kind of know-it-all arrogance. All of these differences were causing cracks to develop, threatening to pull the community apart.

So Paul had to find ways draw them together, to get them to stop focusing on what made them different and start focusing on what united them. And what united them was the love of God in Jesus Christ.

He dealt with the surface issue about meat by pointing out what one group had figured out: if there is no god but GOD, then there was no idolatrous “taint” on the meat and they could eat it with clear consciences. But then he digs a little to get to the problems underneath. He warns that same group of people that they need to beware of getting too “puffed up” with this knowledge. Rather than stand back and look with contempt on those “weak” Christians who were still struggling with these issues, they need to practice self-sacrificial love of their brothers and sisters in Christ. If they were with a person who couldn’t separate the meat from the worship of the god to whom it was sacrificed, the stronger needed to exercise self-restraint, for the benefit of the weaker. They needed to be willing to go hungry, if it meant their brother’s faith was strengthened. They needed to be willing to live with the tighter constraint for a while, until their brother could reach the place of greater freedom.

Paul used the example of meat sacrificed to idols because it was relevant to their experience. We don’t live in that world, and so I have another example that might make more sense to you.

I bet most of you know someone who is an alcoholic. And you know how, in those first weeks of sobriety, alcohol is an

incredible temptation. Imagine that you are preparing a nice dinner party, and you invite this newly-sober friend, as well as a friend who has been sober for 20 years. Your friend who has been sober a long time has developed some coping skills for dealing with social situations at which alcohol is served, but your newly-sober friend is still learning. Would you serve wine with dinner?

Probably not. You would choose to refrain from something which for you is not a problem in order to help a friend who is struggling. Your actions would be dictated out of concern for the person who has the most to lose.

This is not a call to be hypocrites. This is not a call to pretend that you agree with the narrower position your brother takes. You don't have to believe alcohol is inherently sinful in order to understand that for your brother it leads him into sin. You don't have to pretend that you believe that meat is anything more than meat.

This is, instead, a call to be generous. It is an opportunity to practice hospitality of the heart, to be patient with the one who is still figuring things out, and letting them figure it out on their own. If you have ever been on the receiving end of such a generosity of spirit, you know its transformative power.

That's the point. True Christian community is determined not by the desires of the strongest, but by the needs of the weakest. In true Christian community, those with the most power use it to build up the entire community. In true Christian community, those who are farthest along the path of righteousness are the ones most willing to wait and walk with the slowest, offering their own strength to help the

weakest continue walking when they're ready to give up. This is a pilgrimage we share, not a race. The point is not to get to the finish line before everyone else. The point is to get everyone to the finish line, even if it means that we come in last.

And we do this, because this is the way Christ loved us, and this is the way Christ wants us to love one another.

Amen.