Epiphany 4

January 31, 2021

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

At first glance, our epistle reading today doesn’t exactly seem like a helpful text. I feel fairly comfortable assuming that none of us have been in a position to wonder if it’s OK to eat meat sacrificed on the altar of a false god.

But 2000 years ago, the early Christians found themselves in just that position. So the meat didn’t go to waste, sacrificed food would sometimes be offered to people.

For at least some of the Christians in Corinth, eating meat sacrificed to a false god wasn’t a problem. They had grown in their faith to the point where they could confidently declare that “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things” and “no idol in the world really exists.”

For some, their knowledge was liberating. It freed them from doubt. It reminded them of the gifts of mercy and grace that God offered them. It helped them feel confident in their faith.

For them, it was just meat.

Paul does not challenge their theology.

But, he says, for others, such behavior was considered sinful. For others, that meat was a stumbling block. By eating that meat, they were behaving with reckless disregard for their brothers and sisters.

Paul understood that idols were not benign things. They existed for a reason, and that reason was for the worship of people who believed in the gods they represented. Those gods meant something important to the people who made sacrifices at their altars, and the food sacrificed on those altars meant something important, too.

For some of the Corinthian Christians it was easy to dismiss those idols as false gods, to stay strong in their faith in God while consuming the foods sacrificed on those altars.

But not all of their brothers and sisters shared their knowledge, and some simply disagreed. For some, the notion of eating meat sacrificed to a false idol challenged their faith. It may have made them wonder if any kind of acknowledgement of other gods was a violation of the First Commandment — “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.”

Paul accuses them of allowing their knowledge to puff them up. They could eat that food, feeling confident that they had grown enough in their faith to see it simply as meat.

But such confidence allowed them to disregard the feelings of their brothers and sisters in Christ, and it allowed their behavior to become a stumbling block.

Paul’s not saying knowledge isn’t important. He’s saying that applying knowledge in wise and discerning ways is *more* important. And *agape* love is even more important than that.

Paul knew that eating meat sacrificed to a pagan god wasn’t going to upset his spiritual journey. But he set aside his liberty so that he could be kind to someone else.

When he’s faced with people on both sides of the debate, Paul doesn’t side with either – he doesn’t ban eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods, nor does he tell everyone they ought to do it, regardless of what fears they have.

He warns his readers to be careful when they think they’re right, because that’s when it’s easy to neglect the feelings of other people, the life situation of other people, their place in their spiritual journey.

He tells them to be compassionate and kind, to put the needs of the community ahead of their own needs. And he tells us that when we hurt others, when we place stumbling blocks in other people’s faith journey, we don’t just hurt them. **We hurt Christ.**

And that’s what makes this passage a timeless one.

We have a tendency to insist upon being right, and we’re not always good at understanding why other people think we’re wrong.

And we have a tendency to want to “exercise our personal rights to the fullest, while totally disregarding” the ramifications of our actions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Simply put, Paul reminds us that just because we *can* do something doesn’t mean we *should*.

Knowledge might tell us that we can do a thing, but wisdom and *agape* love may disagree.

Throughout 1st Corinthians, Paul insists upon the importance of wisdom and love. They are more important than knowledge. Wisdom and *agape* love don’t puff us up. They don’t give us an exaggerated sense of our own importance.

Instead, wisdom and love remind us of our place in the universe, and they allow us to encourage others to use their gifts.

As the beloved children of God, we receive grace and mercy and love beyond measure.

Our call as disciples is to share that grace and mercy and love. *To build up others* rather than ourselves.

Paul doesn’t say it, but he’s telling us to opt for the kind thing whenever we can. He tells us that when we have the opportunity to choose between grace and being right, to choose grace.

It’s easy to get wrapped up in our own thoughts, our own knowledge, our own lives. But we are not called to the easy path. We are called to be signs of God’s love for others.

And sometimes that means choosing to refrain from doing things that are permissible because they are not beneficial.

We’re not always going to get it right. But because God forgives us for both what we do *and* what we fail to do, we have the freedom to keep on trying without fear that God will punish us for falling short.

Knowledge puffs us up, but love builds up. What we do and say reveals who we are and what is most important to us. More importantly, they reveal *whose* we are: God's beloved children, named and claimed and forgiven, and sent out to share God's love with others.

May the love of God the Father and the example of Jesus allow you to hear the Holy Spirit guiding you in all that you say and do.

1. Alvin Padilla, *Connections* 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, “Connecting with Scripture” p. 423 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)