

Written Copy: 1 Corinthians 8:12-13 “Out of Love for Your Brother”

4th Sunday @ Epiphany

Sunday, January 31st, 2021

Text: 1 Corinthians 8:12-13

¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Exegetical Statement

Paul is now addressing in his letter a question/concern that the Corinthian Church had raised in regard to eating meat sacrificed to idols. In doing so he contrasts “knowledge” that puffs up with sacrificial love that builds up. There were some who considered themselves to have perfect knowledge in all things, so much so that in other issues Paul addresses they feel they know better than he. He begins with agreeing with these Christians that idols are nothing: they do not exist, and they have no power to help anyone. Therefore meat that has been cooked on an altar of an idol contains nothing in and of itself that can hurt or help anyone. But those who think they are perfect to judge others by their knowledge do not yet know all they need to. Knowledge applied without Christian sacrificial love puffs up the one who has it, while harming others. Those who have recently been converted from idol worship carry baggage left over from their false beliefs. While many Christians may be comfortable in their view that meat from an idol’s altar is harmless, they may remember the false trust they put in the sacrifice to idols, and in consuming the meat find their consciences conflicted, and find themselves in doubt. They may even be led to return to idol worship thinking that others who eat the sacrificed meat are condoning and even joining in worshipping the idol, especially those who ate in the temple dining halls. While eating per se will not draw one closer to God, make them better Christians, nor make them suffer demerit in God’s eyes, attacks on the conscience will. So much so that the freedom the knowledgeable Christian cites to eat all meat is serving not to build up the faith of those with weakened conscience, but instead it is inflicting damage upon their souls, with the end result that they knowledgeable Christian is sinning against Christ by causing a precious soul that He died to save to fall away from faith. Therefore Paul states that our concern for the building up of our brothers be done guided by the love of Christ which moves us to sacrifice our rights out of love for the brother. Paul states that if his eating meat causes other Christians to lose faith, he would forever become a vegetarian rather than be the cause of another losing faith.

Focus Statement:

Those Christian brothers and sisters who struggle with matters of faith in their conscience are those for whom Christ sacrificed His life on the cross for. He has placed us alongside of them to be His voice of faith and encouragement, building them up through Christian love and concern for them. And if we cause offence through something we do or say, we are forgiven by the same sacrifice that has brought them to faith. The love that Christ shared from the cross is the power for us and them to be built up in the faith.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

Christians with a “mature faith” can sometimes consider certain things and activities as being adiaphora (matters of indifference). Other Christians who take exception to these things we say should grow up in faith and believe that simply sharing our doctrinal knowledge is the answer. Freed by the Gospel we see these things as not specifically spoken against in God’s law and therefore we are free to indulge and enjoy them. In our freedom we lose sight of the damage we can do to fellow Christians, to the point of causing them to fall from faith.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Watch out that what we consider to be adiaphora does not cause our fellow Christian to fall away from faith. Demonstrate the sacrificial love of Christ by forging some of what we consider adiaphora and allowed by Christian freedom in the name of sacrificial love for our fellow Christian, seeking to build them up in love and not cause them to fall away or be overcome with a guilty conscience over those things they struggle with.

Subject Sentence: Let Sacrificial Love Guide My Actions

Introduction: Adiaphora That Harms

When I was on Vicarage in Chicago, I went on a bus trip with the High School Youth Group to Lutheran Island Camp in Henning Minnesota, which is 3 hours northwest from St. Paul. On our way we stopped off at my Vicarage Pastor's home church in St. Paul. It was a Sunday afternoon, and there was a worship service going on in the basement chapel. It was their African Worship Service for the Ethiopian Immigrants that the Church sponsors. The sound of the singing, the instruments, and the rhythm of the music sounded uniquely African, even though the hymn they were singing was distinctly Western European in flavor, drawn from the Lutheran Hymnal. I was mesmerized. I love percussive music that has a good beat. The sound of their worship drew me in, and I wanted to stay and worship with them. It sounded so joyful and so free-that's the only way I could describe it. I tend to like percussive music, and they were singing and playing in a style that had been a part of the African culture that they had recently come from.

So I was surprised when I read an article saying that on the missionary field bringing in too much cultural context from any non-Christian culture can pose a problem. The article talked about problems missionaries had run into in Papa New Guinea. They had assumed that using instruments that were part of the non-Christian culture they were witnessing to would be a good way to connect with the singing of hymns that were distinctly from another culture, namely the Western European Lutheran hymns. But the culture of Papa New Guinea believed in ancestral spirits: that the spirit of deceased relatives could be called on to advise and direct the living. When the missionaries incorporated the drums that the natives had used in their own pagan worship services it caused major problems. Instead of helping them to connect with Christian hymns, the drums served to draw them back into their pagan worship. They had believed that through the playing of the drums the voices of their ancestors were speaking. And so here during this Christian worship service many still heard the voices of the deceased ancestors, and in their minds these voices were competing with the voice of the Holy Spirit in the hymns. Even those who came to believe that there were no such things as ancestral spirits still struggled with hearing those drums, some fearing that the evil which is behind all false worship, Satan, was present with them when the drums were played. Out of love and concern for these new Christians, the missionaries discontinued use of the drums.

Now using drums in Christian worship doesn't have the same problem for us. Most of us did not grow up believing in ancestral spirits that speak through drums, or any other instrument. But what about Contemporary Worship Music? As I said I like percussive rhythmic music that has a beat. I have no problem with guitars, keyboards, bass guitars, drums, and the like used in worship. I have no problem with Contemporary Worship Music that has a solid Biblical Message in line with what we believe and confess as Lutherans. I am particularly fond of these contemporary instruments playing and giving a contemporary feel to the LSB hymns. But I understand that not everyone in our congregation does. If we were to switch over totally to Contemporary style worship music

in our only worship service, I think I would be alienating a large group of worshipers for whom that style of worship music is not worshipful.

Now the Bible certainly doesn't specify what style of music, or rhythm, or instruments that should be used in worship. The guiding principle for us Lutherans is that the overall feeling is respectful and worshipful. Beyond that we have freedom to worship in whatever manner we please as long as we retain the main elements of Biblical worship: Apostolic teaching from the Scriptures, prayer, the communion and fellowship exemplified in the Lord's Supper. So how does the freedom we have as Christians balance out with the stipulations some have regarding what is worshipful and what is not?

Outside of worship I'm fond of the rock n' roll music that I grew up listening to. As many of you know I like to listen to, among other groups, the Beatles. But I know of Christians that believe the only music a good Christian should listen to, especially a Pastor, is Christian music. They feel that rock music which comes out of a culture that glorifies drugs and sex is inherently evil in nature. So, does the kind of music I listen to matter? I could argue that according to Christian freedom I have a right to enjoy that which is not sinful for me. Listening to the Beatles doesn't make me want to go take drugs. But for others who have come out of the drug culture listening to the same music may leave a different impression. What kind of witness might I be making before them? I'm not an alcoholic so for me its perfectly OK to enjoy a beer or two. But if I'm with someone who is struggling with alcoholism what does my witness say to them? Am I causing them to struggle with their conscience by my decisions and actions? Christian freedom says I can enjoy these things. But can their come a time when I abuse my Christian freedom to the detriment of others?

The Adiaphora That Harmed in Paul's Day

In our Epistle Lesson Paul is arguing on behalf of the Christian brother with the weaker conscience. While the phrase "the weaker brother" can refer to those who are relatively new in the Christian faith, this is not necessarily always the case. Paul argues in **1 Corinthians 8:2** "**If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.**" What he is arguing here is that anyone who thinks they are beyond any spiritual hang ups better think again. None of us have perfect knowledge and a perfect faith this side of eternity.

The specific problem Paul is dealing with is a question put to him by the Corinthian congregation: 'Is it OK to eat meat that has was previously sacrificed on a pagan idol's altar?' To understand why this was an issue we need to understand the cultural context from which this question comes.

The city of Corinth was a seaport town, and there were many different cultures intermingling in this city. It has been likened to a modern-day New Orleans because it was known for its decadent behavior. It was a city that teemed with the worship of many different gods in many different temples. One of the most infamous temples was for the goddess Aphrodite, which employed many women and even men that worked as temple prostitutes. Many of these different temples were separated into different sections within them. And admission to certain sections was dependent upon your place in society. Many had something akin to dining halls where local businessmen and tradesmen would eat and do business. The idea was that what you planned and discussed would be overheard by the god or goddess of the temple where you ate, who might be encouraged to grant blessing or favor upon your business ventures. But for an increasing number of citizens and travelers, who had seen similar temples in many other cities, and similar gods with differing names, the supernatural aspect of being in the temple had fallen by the wayside. They came and ate there more for the networking aspect, because it was a good place to conduct business with like-minded people, and not so much for the blessing of any god. Although, if that particular god happened to exist, and happened to be able to bless them, all the better. Meat was a delicacy back then. And meat that had been used previously as a sacrifice on a pagan altar was often later discounted in the marketplace.

So how might the Christian businessman consider his eating in one of these dining halls? As Paul clearly states **1 Corinthians 8:4-6** **⁴Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one."** **⁵For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth---as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"---⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.** Paul is stating the Christian confession that there is only One God in the entire universe. That God is the Father who created all things and from whom we all have our existence, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things came into being as the Word of God made flesh, and through whom the Christian has a new life of faith. All other gods and idols do not exist and cannot help us. Therefore, eating in the temple dining hall, while not really worshiping that particular god who doesn't exist, was just the Christian businessman being where he needed to be to earn his living. In fact one could even argue that as a Christian eating in a pagan temple Jesus had a witness there.

And concerning eat meat that once rested on the altar of an idol Paul states the argument that **1 Corinthians 8:8** **"Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do."** Our everyday food that we eat doesn't earn us any brownie points with God no matter what it is. It doesn't matter if you eat pork, consume chocolate, or drink beer. All of these in and of themselves are good and gracious gifts from God, and consuming them doesn't put us on God's naughty list. So buying idol meat in the marketplace, or eating in those temple dining areas should be considered no problem for the Christian right? Not so fast Paul says.

While it might not harm the Christian that is secure in his faith that idols do not exist, and that meat is simply a gift from God Himself, no matter where it was cooked, that is not the case with all Christians. **1 Corinthians 8:7 However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.** Paul is saying there are those Corinthian Christians who are still struggling in their Christian walk as former worshipers of idols. They are Christians who are trusting in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. But they are still maturing in their faith. There was a time in their life when they were worshiping idols, eating the meat sacrificed on the altar, and all the while thinking that by doing so the idol would bless them. They did these things being careful not to do anything that would anger their god and make it angry. While they no longer believed such things, the remnants of these false beliefs still lingered in their conscience. For them to go and eat in one of those temple dining halls would be very wrong. It caused feelings of shame and guilt to rise their conscience.

1 Corinthians 8:10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? These same troubled Christians, seeing a brother who appears secure in his faith, eating in one of these temple dining halls could, with all the spiritual baggage that they still carry, be misinterpreted. They could see the secure Christian's actions as a stamp of approval on being back in that temple, back in the place that still calls to them to engage in the false worship, something that had been part of their life for so long. They might even begin to see the actions of that secure Christian saying, "It's OK to worship Jesus and this idol for the sake of success in business or other areas of your life. It's the same kind of reasoning an alcoholic who is struggling with sobriety can fall into when he sees a Christian brother enjoying a beer or two. He thinks "It's OK for him, so it must be OK for me." And that is what his sinful heart is so desperate to believe, pushing him to throw caution to the wind. So that the witness given by the Christian brother aids him in falling off the wagon.

Now as a Christian I can argue that I didn't make my fellow brother who struggles with alcohol return to drinking. After all I didn't buy him a bottle of beer and pour it down his throat. Nor did the Christian eating in the temple force his brother struggling with the idol worship in the past to renounce faith in Jesus. But Paul indicates that as members of the Church we do bear responsibility for the faith walk of our fellow Christians. **1 Corinthians 8:9-12 ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.** While the Christian who doesn't believe or worship in idols is free to eat wherever he wants, he is not free to cause his brother with the weak and troubled conscience to stumble and fall from faith. Even if what I am doing is not a sin for me, and therefore I am free to enjoy what is God's good gift to me,

I have no right to enjoy it if it results in the destruction of my brother's life of faith. Why is that true? Because that Christian brother whose conscience is weak, is a soul for whom Christ gave His life to save.

Paul Calls Us To Be Guided By Christian Love

Paul is telling us that our Christian freedom is governed by the sacrificial love that Jesus has shown us from the cross. You are one of those souls that Jesus found so precious that He was willing to suffer and die to save you. He did all that was necessary so that you could be saved from the grasp of the evil that is behind all the false gods and things people have worshiped in the past and to this day. He saved you from the grasp of Satan and from the eternal destruction Satan and his demons will face, along with all of those who refuse to believe. He earned for you the right standing you have before the Father. And by the faith He has given you in your baptism, and renewed in the Gospel message, He has made all things in your life new. By His recreating power those things that are made evil by the sinful brokenness in the hearts of men have been remade as the good gifts of our loving Father, such things as food, and even alcohol. Jesus loves you so much that His Spirit remains in you protecting you from all the schemes of the world and of Satan to lure you away. He wants you with Him forever in eternal life.

Jesus feels the same way about your brother in the faith who is struggling in his conscience with guilt over things that his past has left marks on, struggling with things that because of who he is, and what he's been through, are a bigger deal for him than for you. The last thing Jesus wants is for our weakened brother to fall away from faith. And if we, in the name of Christian freedom, doing what makes us happy, serve to cause our brother to fall away, we are working against our Savior. To be working against our Savior means sinning against our Savior, who gave His life to save our struggling brother by calling him to faith and sending His Spirit in the Gospel message to keep him in faith. In the Gospel Message Jesus wants us to share His love and forgiveness with our struggling brother so that he knows that, even when he slips up, he is forgiven. As Jesus' Church we are called to lives of service not to ourselves, but first to our Lord, and then to the spiritual health and welfare of our brother whose comfort we are to place before our own. How do we do that? By putting his needs before our own. By putting his weakness of faith before our claim to Christian freedom. So that when we are around him, we avoid things that we know he is struggling with. And when we inadvertently do cause him to stumble, we are to stop what we are doing, ask his forgiveness, and let him know that in Christ he, as well as you, are completely forgiven.

Adiaphora We Should Watch For

So what are these things you and I should watch out for so as not to cause our fellow member here at Lamb of God to stumble, to fall away from faith? Well, the idols of today have changed from Paul's day. Some of the things people today worship or make as important as God if not more so are: alcohol and drugs, their possessions including car, house, and the stuff we fill the house with. People make their careers, their families, even themselves -their own health more important than the God who has given them these things. People raise up political parties and leaders and trust in them rather in God.

How should I go about giving a loving witness to them concerning these things? By not being cavalier about my fellow Christian's struggles with things that I am not struggling with. By not insinuating that all they need is a stronger faith. By remembering Paul's advice in **1 Corinthians 8:2** "**If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.**" About the time you think you've got the Christian life down pat you may discover your spiritual Achilles heel. By talking with our brothers and sisters, confiding in one or two we trust what we struggle with, and then listen confidentially to what they struggle with. Then pray with them that the LORD would help them and provide them strength in these areas. All the while making a mental note not to do anything around them that would cause them to stumble in their faith walk.

Conclusion

One particular thing that has come to my mind while studying these verses is the issue of wearing face masks. I don't particularly care to wear them. When I'm in the office at church by myself I don't wear one. But I've come to realize that when visitors come in, I am slow to put one on. When I walk into the Fellowship Hall, and people are gathered in there I sometimes neglect to put one on. I do have a firm confidence that the LORD is protecting me as I go about doing my vocation as His under-shepherd here at Lamb of God. But that doesn't mean I should throw caution to the wind. And that doesn't mean that those who come in wearing masks don't have the strength of faith that I do. I believe they do. But for some their physical condition calls for them to be very careful and remain protected. But others have told me they wear masks for a different reason, out of love for me and others here at Lamb of God, so that they are not the reason or source of COVID-19 infection in my life. And that is a God honoring act. That is living in the love of Christ that Paul here is calling us to live in. That is sacrificing their freedom for the love and protection of others, both their physical and spiritual wellbeing. Amen