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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
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Lectionary Year B: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Today and the three Sundays following will give us an opportunity to focus on several passages from First Corinthians. You will notice that our lectionary texts include, as the Second Reading, a sequence of selections from the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters, which is going to be the basis for a sermon series (as outlined in the announcements in this morning's bulletin). This will be, at least in light of my career preaching for almost two decades, one of the most thorough examinations I've ever done of the apostle Paul's theology based on one of his best-known undisputed writings.

In First Corinthians, it is clear that Paul is dealing with a number of issues including divisions in the church, abuses of the Lord's Supper, sexual behavior, and how the church should exist within its context. Paul's advice among many readers nowadays is not always well taken; in fact, he seems to those of a more liberal theological persuasion to dislike women, to be hostile to the LGBTQ community, and to promote unhealthy beliefs about human sexuality. If any of you are inclined to think this way about Paul, I highly doubt that a sermon series will change your mind, but it could shed some light on why Paul believed and taught as he did. That might allow you to give him a more favorable analysis.

This morning, in First Corinthians, chapter 6, we see Paul re-

sponding to problems within the church at Corinth relating to sexual behavior. He knows that, in Christ, all Christians are made free, but also knows that proclaiming this can be risky; will they, for example, confuse freedom with license? Now, they can say, "We're free...whoo+hoo...now we can do whatever we want!" Then, Paul returns to the picture and says, "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are beneficial" (6:12). In this observation, I hear something along the lines of "Just because you can doesn't mean you should." Surely, as a Jew, Paul would know the difference between what life was like living according to the Jewish law and what life is like after Christ fulfilled the law's demands once and for all. Yes, a burden was lifted, but this "lifting" shouldn't be thought of as a license to do whatever you please.

I don't think it's fair or accurate to accuse Paul of showing up in Corinth and throwing a cold, wet blanket on everybody's party. But this is exactly what those who accuse Paul of being a prudish killjoy think. Yes, Paul is going to put an end to your fun, with standards of behavior that are sexually repressive and leaving us with lives devoid of joy and merriment. But from what I know about ancient Greece and the Mediterranean world, the decadence of sexual behavior back then would be shocking by today's standards. Indeed, what Paul walked into would make the Woodstock generation blush! Without going into great detail, we could say that "sexual immorality" for Paul would be considered unacceptable by just about any average person today, regardless of political viewpoint.

Unfortunately, we cannot bring Paul into the present (physically, at least), but, given what we know, some things that Paul might find objectionable would be swinging, orgies, and "hooking up."

From this point, Paul has to put forth a positive vision of Christian behavior. By now, we know what we shouldn't do, but what about what we should do? We know who we aren't, but what about who we are? Rather than allowing people to continue habits that were destructive to both individual and community, Paul points to God and the standard of behavior by which glory is given to God. Can you glorify God in, say, the company of prostitutes? Probably not. If you bring depravity upon your body, you bring depravity upon your self. It would be impossible for Paul to excuse someone by saying, "He [or she] indulges in orgies regularly, but overall is still a good person." This is where Paul often offends the sensibilities of post-Sexual Revolution readers, and while I don't think it's possible to get everyone agreeing with Paul, I think we can still come to an understanding of why he came to his conclusions.

Paul had a rather extensive "theology of the body," as it has often been called. Many have (unfortunately) reduced their understanding of it to a single verse, which appears in our text. It says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...?" (6:19a). From this verse, Christians have then gone on to moralize about the evils of drinking, smoking, and the like, which probably is consistent with the apostle Paul but rather narrow in scope and not fully true to his theology of the

body. A more comprehensive interpretation might be to say that, because God's Spirit dwells in us, we respond by giving glory to God in what we do and say. So, what sorts of things might be God-glorifying, God-honoring, or God-thanking? Surely, things that are downright immoral wouldn't fall into this category; even as our world is accused of rampant moral relativism, there's still a good chunk of people out there with a sense of right and wrong! Assuming that this is the case for us, we can identify God-glorifying things like love, forgiveness, justice, fairness, charity, compassion, and self-restraint. I'm not a good Roman Catholic, so I won't start naming "virtues," but you can probably see concepts related to them if that is your background.

Now, if you were a member of the early Christian community at Corinth, and if you enjoyed your freewheeling, if not decadent, lifestyle, why would you bother following Paul's advice? Giving up your fun to be a good Christian would be a tough tradeoff, wouldn't it? Certainly, Paul holds Christians to a higher standard and offers a rather stark choice for his friends in Corinth, namely, "Which would you sooner be a part of?" Would you choose immorality or morality, prostitutes or a monogamous relationship, an orgy or a prayer group? But you can't have both, because, as evidenced in the Corinthians' abuse of the Lord's Supper, some were leaving the Supper drunk and full, while others got nothing at all. Your body is to be guided by God-glorifying principles that manifest themselves in responsible and prudent behavior. And, at the same time, you can destroy that very same body with

irresponsible and imprudent behavior...and then what would you have left to glorify God with?

I will be very cautious, however, to ensure that all of this is put into a broader theological context so that this sermon doesn't devolve into petty moralizing. A text like we have today lends itself to all kinds of moralistic interpretations that lead into pure Law and lose the Gospel completely. At the close of our reading, Paul indeed brings in the Gospel; he writes, "For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (6:20). Here, we can see that God's grace in Jesus Christ is our motivation to heed all this other advice from Paul. Because Christ "paid the price" (a transactional metaphor that can be overused) for our sins by dying on the cross, we have been freed from sin and therefore are able to "go and sin no more." So, if you have been granted this precious gift, how might you appropriately respond? Paul says that you are to "glorify God in your body" (6:20b), indicating that things like love, forgiveness, justice, fairness, charity, compassion, and self-restraint are proper expressions of your status as a child of God redeemed by Jesus Christ.

To put it bluntly, you behave yourself not because you're afraid of going to hell, but because the gates of heaven have been opened to you!

Since Paul's theology of the body so often veers into matters of sexual ethics, I would remind everyone, too, that there is a context that needs to be considered before applying Paul's teachings

to today. I've noticed that it is often assumed that humankind is at its worst point in history right now for sexual ethics, and, therefore, the apostle Paul should be able to straighten everybody out like he did the Corinthians. But Paul isn't necessarily asking us to straighten everybody out in the year 2021; he is, however, asking us to consider what sorts of behaviors and relationships might impede our giving of glory to God. Or, we might ask, more simply, "What gets in the way of us being Christians?" For the Corinthians, it was pretty clear that their sexual habits were becoming a problem in that regard. Can the same be said of us?

Related to these questions is our ongoing conversation -- stalled since the outbreak of Covid -- on welcoming gay and lesbian persons as well as same-sex marriage. I have known both biblical scholars and laymen who like to throw proof texts -- from the apostle Paul, especially -- at the matter as a way of shutting down the conversation altogether. In light of this, I would (again) stress context; whenever we interpret Paul for our times, we can overlook neither the differences nor the similarities between the ancient world and ours. And it goes without saying that Paul devotes far more verbiage to opposite-sex relationships than to same-sex relationships.

We will, as a congregation, continue to commit ourselves to further conversation -- as the easing of pandemic restrictions allows -- on issues relating to gay and lesbian persons and same-sex marriage in the church. We have proven in previous conversations that we can be both civil and cordial, and, if I may inject a

couple more elements, I would encourage our conversations to be also Spirit-led and Scripturally-based. It is good to let ourselves be led rather than attempting to lead and to use our Bibles to open our hearts rather than grind our axes.

Finally, if there's anything you get out of this that's worthwhile at all, may it be a deeper appreciation for the apostle Paul's zeal for the Gospel. It is unfortunate that his rich theology has often been reduced to petty moralizing, and that his sexual ethics, in particular, have been taken out of context so as to paint him as a prudish killjoy. As a corrective to such misconceptions, I would lift up his deep appreciation of God's grace and its transformative effect on the human body, mind, and soul. That, for sure, is how the good news works within us...and how we're able to live as if we have been so transformed.

Amen.