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Lectionary Year B: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

What could the issue of food that has been sacrificed to idols possibly have to do with us? Well, I decided to do a sermon series on the First Corinthians texts from the lectionary because of the challenges of exploring parts of the Bible that are often easy to overlook. What preacher would deliberately seek out a text that apparently addresses an obscure, ancient concern whose relevance faded away centuries ago? Well, that's one reason why liturgical churches such as ours use a schedule of prescribed lectionary readings; it provides structure, builds Christian unity, and shapes a discipline within preachers to explore as much of the whole of Scripture as possible. Otherwise, you'd be stuck with Father Ryan preaching about whatever he wanted to preach about and using cherry-picked passages of Scripture to defend his claims.

But before Paul launches into his discourse on food that has been sacrificed to idols, he sets everything up with a distinction between knowledge and love. The Corinthians, like a lot of people in the ancient Greek world, equate knowledge with status, which is probably not all that different from the more modern phenomenon of holding educated people in higher esteem than uneducated people. Paul would say, however, that this is of lesser importance than love; his exact words are, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1b). But we need to remember that love, in this case, is not some sentimental feeling or romantic affection; instead, it is

a lived, ongoing engagement in the lives of our neighbors. This involves action, so the question becomes, "What have we done that reveals the love we have for our neighbors?" And it is very important to remember that we don't have to like people in order to extend loving deeds toward them. Were liking someone a prerequisite for doing the loving thing, we would be severely hamstrung in the exercise of our Christian duties.

Similarly, if knowledge becomes a means by which we discriminate against those whom we are called to love -- whether in terms of education, background, or number of years in the church -- we are "puffing up" ourselves rather than building up the church. A commentary I read while preparing this sermon stressed the importance of being loving over being right. Thus, your neighbor might need compassion more than correction...listening instead of discipline. Of course, discipline is fine as long as it is not applied with malice and cruelty. No one, for example, can convince me that a father who whips his son with a belt forty times on his bare bottom is doing so out of love!

Furthermore, you can know "the right stuff," but it is, indeed, a greater challenge to do "the right stuff." For Paul, if you do not have God with you, both are impossible; he writes, "Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge" (8:2). Often, the ancient Greeks regarded human wisdom as one of the greatest things one could possess, but it was exactly that -- human wisdom. You can claim to have as much of it as you want, but without God, you toil in vain. True knowledge comes

about when you are known by God (8:3), which means that you have entered into a relationship with him in the community of faith. But even this knowledge doesn't mean you'll do "the right stuff." Only when you consider the impact of your actions on your neighbor will you be able to do the right thing.

This is how Paul sets up his discourse on whether or not it is acceptable to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols. But why would this be an issue in the first place? Ancient Corinth was a bustling center of all sorts of things, including religion, but the pagan religions of gods, goddesses, and sacrifice would have been most common, and, customarily, a sacrifice of something (like food) would be used to gain the attention or favor of the gods and goddesses. If you travel through the ruins of ancient Greek cities, you will find remains of ancient temples in which these sacrifices likely took place. Back in Paul's time, there would often be food left over from sacrifices; it was not discarded, but rather redistributed to the public. (As an aside, I'm not entirely sure what markers were used to differentiate between food that had been sacrificed and food that hadn't -- but there must've been because how else could it have been an issue?)

The reason why food that had been sacrificed to idols would've been an issue (at least for some) is pretty clear, however. Say, for example, a group of Wiccans -- or practitioners of modern witchcraft -- had gathered in Warsaw and had some food left over from one of their meetings, and then someone takes it and brings it over to St. Anne's to serve at one of our functions. The food

is perfectly safe to eat, and, as a matter of fact, it tastes quite good. Would, however, some taint still be on the food because it had been in the presence of practitioners of an esoteric religion? Paul addresses such concerns by saying, "As to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists,' and that 'there is no God but one'" (8:4). Thus, if the deities or powers or whomever or whatever the food has been offered to are illegitimate, it really shouldn't matter if we eat this food because we don't recognize them in any way whatsoever. One could say, "Hey, I have some really good leftovers here...but they had been offered to the god Dorkfusdingle" -- were that to happen, what would your response be?

I know Paul would say, "That doesn't matter because God is our God and Dorkfusdingle has no power over us." We know this.

But Paul also realizes that not everyone knows this. He speaks further to the matter: "Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled" (8:7b). Paul is pointing here to an instance where, perhaps, a person is new to the Christian faith -- coming from the pagan Corinthian background -- and this food that had been sacrificed to idols might shake them up a bit because of their previous beliefs being recalled. Could it call their newfound faith into question? Might they then abandon the Christian faith and lapse back into their pagan beliefs? Paul would tell us that this is a risk we shouldn't take with food that was sacrificed to idols.

Bringing this concern into the present day, let's imagine that you have a friend who's just completed a 28-day stint in rehab coming over for a visit. He or she is trying to kick an addiction to alcohol and sobriety is a relatively new thing. He or she arrives and the first thing you do is reach for a bottle of your favorite gin, grab the shaker, and proceed to make a martini. Then you lovingly pour the concoction into a single glass -- yours -- garnish it with an olive and sip away in the presence of your newly sober friend.

If you had even half a brain you might ask, "Hey, would you like a soda or something?" But let's assume you don't. Would Paul -- or anyone -- think this was a good idea?

No!

But does that mean you have to pour your favorite gin down the drain and abstain from drinking forever? No! Rather, you need to exercise some sensitivity in your actions around others. Paul puts it this way at the conclusion of today's text: "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall" (8:13). I think Paul might be using a bit of hyperbole here, but, if you substitute another word for meat in this verse -- like alcohol -- you'll get the picture. But just because you shouldn't do certain things around certain people doesn't mean you can't do them at all. I don't think Paul ever became a vegetarian even though First Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 13 might give one that impression.

In the first in this series of sermons, I commented on how impressionable children are and, therefore, how important it is for them to be taught well; it is, indeed, not that much of a stretch to see what our actions are "teaching" others about us. What impressions might others have of us? What habits might they be acquiring from us? To such questions, it would be easy to go all cowboy-John-Wayne and say, "I don't give a flying flip about what others think"...but remember, neither you nor I are John Wayne. Thus, we are called to exercise some sensitivity as to how we might influence the actions of those around us. That, basically, is Paul's point in First Corinthians, chapter 8. When we are loving toward our neighbor, exercising that sensitivity comes naturally. On the other hand, when we go cowboy and say, "I don't give a flying flip about what anyone else thinks," we're not exactly inclined to exercise sensitivity...or be loving.

Thankfully, we have a God who guides us through situations in which knowing what is right and doing what is right could bring us to different conclusions. If the Corinthians know that it's okay to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols, should they eat it with total disregard of those around them? No! But where do they obtain the capacity for such discernment? Could it be from God? Of course! When we, in our baptismal covenant, promise to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ," we affirm that it is with God's help that we so do. Apart from that -- and this is at the root of Paul's criticism of the Corinthians' reliance on knowledge -- we have nothing. Knowledge is of limited help. God is of infinite help. And God claims us in Baptism so

that we might follow Christ's example in what we say and do.

That may seem like a lot to ask of people who are not Jesus Christ, but, as a Christian community, we are Christ's body, and we are -- with God's help -- able not only to exercise sensitivity, but also to do Christ's work (albeit incompletely). With God's help, we are able to heal divisions, mend wounds, and reconcile differences. And God's help comes when the Holy Spirit along with our prayer and persistence bring us the wisdom and courage to do "the right stuff." Without that, all our toil would be in vain, but with that, we are empowered to live as our baptismal covenant calls us.

And today, as always, this covenant calls us to Christ's example of sensitivity, discernment, and reconciliation. Listen, think, and make peace.

Amen.