

Being “Right” and doing the “Right Thing”: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

When it comes to meat choices in Canada, there are endless options. Beef, pork, chicken, venison, kangaroo. Bacon, low sodium bacon, turkey bacon, veggie bacon (I guess that one isn't a meat). Organic, local, grass fed, hormone free. A mind-boggling number of choices. The one choice we should be thankful we don't have to make is whether to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols in some pagan religious ceremony. At first glance, one might wonder what Paul's advice regarding whether one should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols could possibly have to say to the western church in the 21st century. We might be able to make some inferences if we lived in Africa or South America or some such place where animal sacrifice is still a part of some religious ceremonies. But in Canada? We don't really have a section in the grocery store dedicated to food left over from religious sacrifices.

But let's not dismiss Paul's comments too quickly. Over the last couple of weeks, we have been looking at the ways the churches in Corinth were struggling as to how to live as authentic, faithful, and transformed believers in Christ in the midst of a culture that still had a firm grip on their everyday lives. They struggled with how to live distinctively while still celebrating their newfound freedom in Christ. What kind of cultural activities were ok to engage in, what kind of food was ok to eat, what kind of people were ok to hang out with, what kind of relationships were ok to have. And given the diverse make-up of the congregation, working out these questions was no easy task. The congregation was made up of Greek pagan converts, as well as Jewish believers who had been kicked out of the local synagogue because of their faith in Jesus. The cultural histories of these groups meant for some fairly strong ideas as to how believers were supposed to live. In an effort to resolve their differences, they posed a number of basic “what do we do when...” questions to Paul.

The question of the day is whether believers should eat meat that had been used as part of ritual sacrifices to the pagan gods. Often, the parts of the animal that weren't burned or given to the priests were then sold in the marketplace. In fact it would have been very difficult to find meat that had not been part of a sacrifice. There was virtually no meat to be had that had not been tainted by its connection to pagan religious rituals. Some of the believers thought that since there really wasn't any such thing as *real* idols/other gods, the meat was just meat and was perfectly fine to eat. Other believers thought that by eating the meat they might actually be implicitly participating in idol worship, thus breaking the 1st two commandments. One group *knew* that idols were just pieces of dead wood or stone and there wasn't anything wrong with the meat. They insisted that they knew better and not eating the meat was just superstition since the idols weren't real anyway. The other group, not being as confident as their more theologically sophisticated friends, didn't want to commit a horrible sin. And the way the passage reads, we might safely infer that the more theologically sophisticated group was pressuring the less confident group to get over their immature and superstitious notions and grow up a little. A dilemma to be sure.

Paul's reply to their questions is where this passage has something to say to the church today. The bottom line, says Paul, is that it doesn't matter whether the meat is ok to eat or not, even though it is. What really matters is how believers support and encourage one another, especially those less mature in the faith. His point – "love prevails over knowledge". Knowing that you are right about what's true and loving your fellow believers aren't always the same thing. And if you want to live together as a faith community, love needs to win out over insisting that you're right, even if you are, especially if your insistence on what you know to be right causes others to struggle in living out their own faith. Believers are supposed to behave in ways that build up the body and are supposed to refrain from doing things that might cause others to question their own faith, or might cause them to stumble in their own faith journey, or might cause them unnecessary anxiety about what they believe and why.

Paul's advice isn't particularly comfortable for those of us who need to be right, and who need others to know that we are right and that we know better than those less mature or less theologically sophisticated Christians. In fact, there might be some of us who push back against letting the weaknesses of others determine how we behave. Why should I let *their* spiritual immaturity determine how *I* live my life? Why shouldn't I behave in this way (there's nothing wrong with it), even if it causes my brother or sister to stumble? Aren't they responsible for their own choices and actions? Absolutely. But Paul reminds the believers that love involves self-sacrifice, and sometimes that means sacrificing the insistence on being right at the expense of weaker or less mature believers, and instead doing the right thing by supporting and encouraging your fellow believer.

And while eating meat sacrificed to idols might not be a pressing concern for most modern day Christians, there are a number of other areas that give us occasion to consider how our behavior affects others within the faith community, and what choices we might make in light of that.

When I was at Knox College, I took a course on the sacraments. In one class, several people got into a rather heated debate about whether we should be serving wine or grape juice or both for communion. All of us *knew* that there was absolutely nothing wrong with consuming alcohol from a Christian perspective, after all, Jesus drank wine and the only thing he ever said against it had to do with drunkenness, not the actual drinking of it. Those who insisted on only serving wine pointed to this knowledge as the basis for their position. In the middle, were those who thought that serving both wine and juice meant that the wine drinkers and the juicers could both have their way.

Then there were those who thought that even having the wine as an option might be too much of a temptation for believers who struggle with alcoholism. To which the wine drinkers replied, "well, that's their problem not mine, and surely a tiny wee cup of wine isn't going to be any real temptation anyway, and Jesus drank and served wine so it's *right* for us to do the same." Clearly the wine drinkers and the middle-grounders knew very little about the nature of addiction.

What might Paul have to say to this debate? I think he would ask us how important it is to be right. Yes, it is true that there is nothing wrong with drinking wine. But the law of love, grace and unity requires that we put aside our need to be right in order to ensure that those who struggle in their faith journey aren't put in unnecessarily difficult positions. The needs of those who are still working out what they think about alcohol or who are struggling with their relationship to alcohol, win out over being right.

The Christian community struggles with many such issues. What we drink, what we wear, what we eat, what we say, how we behave with one another, our use of certain technologies. Every day, we are faced with a multitude of decisions that affect the greater community we live in. And in most of these cases, we find ourselves faced with situations that aren't really covered by Bible. In fact, it is a misunderstanding of the nature of Scripture and its life-giving role in our lives to think that it is merely a catalogue of God's rules on how to be good moral people.

How do we know how to live in the absence of specific, to the letter biblical guidance? Should we attempt to develop rules for every situation we could ever face? History already went that route. Not only is it impractical for us, but pretty soon, we would get lost in the number of rules we'd have to come up with, and even worse, we would become governed, oppressed, and enslaved by rules and regulations (from which Jesus came to free us) instead of the law of love and grace, which Jesus (and Paul) point to as the determining law in all circumstances. Self-sacrificing love for others for the sake of the unity is the guiding force behind all our actions: what we eat, drink, wear, say, or do. At the end of the day, what I want to do, what I want to wear, what I want to drink or eat, what I want to say must be filtered through its affect on the community. It doesn't matter if I think I'm right and that the weaker members should grow up a little (even if I am, and even if they should). Doing what is right for the community requires self-sacrifice. I might not like it, but being a part of a faith community requires it.

The point works the other way as well. There are weaker members of the community who will use their spiritual immaturity in order to get the stronger members to do what they want. Rather than seek to grow deeper in faith and practice, they will use their own weakness to keep others at their level. But this behavior affects the good of the community just as much as when those who are "in the know" assert the fact that they know better.

The consequences of both kinds of self-righteous behaviors are severe. It isn't just a matter of hurting another person's feelings or making them feel like a lesser Christian. In fact, we *destroy* one another and sin against Christ himself. Faced with those kinds of consequences, insisting on being right might take a back seat, to helping, supporting, and encouraging my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ignatius of Antioch was a bishop in southern Turkey in the late first century and early second century. He was what we call a second generation Christian: a leader who was trained personally by the Apostles. He was a man who made no bones about the fact that Jesus was Lord. He was arrested and put on a caravan headed for Rome where he was to

die before Caesar fighting wild beasts in the coliseum for public spectacle. The Romans wanted to let him know who the Lord really was, Caesar. Along the way to Rome, the caravan stopped in major cities where, time and time again, he was made a spectacle of in the coliseums where he was brutally tortured by gladiators and animals alike. The Romans wanted him to get a taste of what awaited him.

The only writings we have of his were seven letters that he wrote along this journey. They are a collection of a dying man's advice. One of the letters was to the young bishop of Smyrna named Polycarp, who also would become a martyr when he was burned to death. Being a leader in the church back then was often fatal. Ignatius gave what he considered the most important advice to the young Polycarp. At the very opening of the letter he writes: "Have a regard for unity, than which nothing is better. Bear with all, even as the Lord does with you. Support all with love, as also you do. Give yourself to prayer without ceasing." His undaunted emphasis on unity reflects something that was most important in the church that the Apostles left behind – far more important than being right at the expense of unity. If unity, communion in love, support and encouragement for one another in Christ was their greatest concern, so it should be for us today...along with praying without ceasing which is the avenue to unity.