

A QUESTION OF RESPONSIBILITY
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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on January 28, 2024

Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, 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.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet 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.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. 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. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 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.

In the first reading this morning, Paul is dealing with a situation in the life of the early church that, honestly, is not very relevant to the life of the church today. However, the underlying issue is extremely relevant. So let’s take a look at this issue and see what it has to do with us.

In Paul’s day, every city had temples and shrines that were dedicated to various Greek and Roman gods. And what people would do was go to these places and make sacrifices. They’d take a goat or a lamb or whatever and slaughter it as an offering. Then they’d

cook the meat and have a meal right there on the spot, like a picnic. And whatever meat was left over, they’d take it to the local marketplace, where anyone could buy it.

This is what led to the situation in the reading.

It happened in the city of Corinth, in southern Greece. People in the church there were doing what everyone was doing. They were going to the marketplace and buying meat that had been sacrificed probably to Apollo. There was a large temple in Corinth

dedicated to Apollo. In fact, you can still see the ruins today.

Now, when Paul got wind of what was going on in the church, he was concerned—enough that he wrote them a letter. But he didn't actually care about the meat-eating itself. He told the Corinthians the pagan gods weren't real, so there was no harm in eating meat that was sacrificed to one of them. It was like eating the cookies you left out for Santa Claus.

So what was Paul concerned about? Well, he understood that not everyone in the church had the same level of spiritual maturity and understanding. Some people were former pagans, who had only recently converted to Christianity, and their faith was still a little bit wobbly. So he was worried about the effect it might have on these new believers if all the other church members were eating meat that had been sacrificed to a god they used to worship not that long ago. He thought it might be confusing for them. He thought they might not be able to separate their new faith from their old beliefs and practices. And he was afraid they might end up falling off the wagon, so to speak. He was afraid they might end up going back to paganism.

So in order to help them stay on the right path, Paul thought everyone in the church should give up sacrificed meat. If it was going to cause some people to lose their way, then don't do it. Simple as that. But the problem was, the people who were eating the sacrificed meat insisted that it was their right, and they had no intention of stopping. They weren't going to let anyone keep them from exercising their freedom.

Paul didn't argue about it, which was probably wise. He didn't question their right to eat whatever they wanted. He took a different approach. He told them to be careful that this liberty of theirs didn't become a stumbling block for others in the church. And he warned them that if it did it, and people ended up losing their faith, then not only would they be sinning against their fellow Christians, they'd be sinning against

Christ. And just in case there was any doubt about where he stood personally, Paul made it absolutely clear. "If food is a cause of their falling," he said, "I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."

The way Paul looked at it, this wasn't a question of rights. It was a question of responsibility. It wasn't about what the Corinthians could do. It was about what they should do. It wasn't about Paul taking something away from them. It was about what they owed one another. Am I my brother's keeper—or my sister's? That was the underlying issue for Paul, and it's still an issue for churches today. In fact, based on my experience, I'd say it's one of the issues for churches today.

Do people listen to each other? Do people honor each other? Do people make room for each other? Do they recognize that everybody's in different spiritual place, and everybody has different spiritual needs? And are they willing to accommodate those differences, not just to be nice, but because they understand that that's part of what it means to be a Christian—that's part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, who came to serve, not to be served?

In other words, are they in it together or are they all going their separate ways?

Of all the things that churches think are important, of all the things that churches spend their time and energy on, in my experience, that's what matters the most—how people treat each other; what kind of spirit they have among them. If church members treat each other the way Paul was urging the Corinthians to treat each other, with grace and deference, and if they have a spirit of community among them, then they're going to thrive, and the life they share is going to be a blessing to everyone. If they don't, then they're going to struggle, and the life they share is going to be exhausting.

Last Sunday, on my way home, I got a call from our General Presbyter. She wanted to give me a heads-up and let me know that

the church I used to serve in Groton is closing, probably by summer. The Presbytery is going to set up an Administrative Committee, and the congregation is going to be dissolved, after 50 years of ministry.

And it's not because they didn't have enough faith. It's not because they didn't have the right theology. It's not because they didn't have good leaders. It's not because they weren't committed. It's not for any of the reasons you might think. It's because, in my view, they had different ideas about who they were as a church, and different visions of where they wanted to go, and they weren't willing to accommodate those differences. They weren't willing to give a little for the sake the other. So instead of coming together in a spirit of compromise and cooperation, they were always butting heads, and the life of the church was always filled with tension.

I feel very sad for them. But I feel very glad for you. Because I don't feel that kind of tension in this church. I don't see people butting heads with each other, insisting on getting their way. I see a congregation of people who don't let their differences come between them. I see a congregation of people who are here, not for themselves, but for each other. I see a congregation of people who know that the love they share is all that matters. Like Paul famously says later on in his letter:

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

If you can remember that and hold on to it, there's no challenge you can't meet, and

there's nothing you can't accomplish. Can I get an amen?