

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

*Living in community with other people is hard. We come at things from **different experiences, different knowledge**, and at this point in the life of the world, even **different sources for knowing what we know**. It's complicated. And the battle lines can get drawn pretty easily. "I know what I know;" "I have a right to do this or that;" "Those are silly rules or customs, and they don't apply to me because I know differently." There's lots of different ways this shows up. And this has been going on since time immemorial.*

Paul is tackling it today in his **first letter to the Corinthians**. The subject at hand... **whether or not one could eat food sacrificed to idols**. He makes a pretty sophisticated argument. First, it's important to understand that **idols were pretty pervasive in the culture of Corinth**. There were **all kinds of associations and guilds and societies** where **food would be offered to a particular idol, kind of a patron saint of that group**, and then **consumed in a communal meal**. So, *opting out of these meals* was going to have a **cultural cost**. It could have **political ramifications**, and **one could take a hit on the social ladder and face ridicule** if you opted out.

So, while **Paul acknowledges that there is only one God and that idols have no real existence, hence, there really is no such thing as food offered to idols; there's just food, he also gets how easy it is for any believer to get pulled off course, giving our allegiance to all kinds of things that aren't the true God. We might know that idols don't really exist, but that's the thing about idols, they are always purporting to be something that they're not, making promises they can't fulfill.**

We can **give our energy to the idol of status, the idol of power, the idol of productivity, the idol of being right, the idol of being better, smarter, more enlightened than the next guy; we can give our energy to the idol of recriminations and retribution. So, while Paul proceeds with this elegant argument of what it means to live with love for the other, let's not forget that Paul also understands the very real danger of giving your heart to all manner of idols that are neither holy nor lifegiving.**

Paul knows the danger of knowledge that's not tempered by LOVE. "Knowledge puffs up," he says, "but love builds up." And throughout this passage, **Paul keeps playing with the image of knowledge and the image of being known. Knowledge resides from the neck up, but being known drops down into the realm of relationship; being known drops us down into the heart. Knowing things with our head apart from our heart, knowing things without that knowledge being tempered by our relationship with God and with our neighbor, can lead us to the isolated, disconnected, I-am-an-island place which fails to see the truth that we are all connected in this great web of life and being. I impact my neighbor AND my neighbor impacts me whether I want that to be the case or not.**

Paul says, "You may know that food is just food, but your neighbor may wrestle with that at a level you don't even understand. Your neighbor's conscience may be weak on that matter. So, listen up Corinthians, '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. Think about it, if others see you, who they see as having 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 and because they aren't where you are, they've divided their heart

and their energy between God, who is the source of all that is, and all these idols of the False Self, that are always vying for our attention. 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.” Paul finishes by throwing down the gauntlet as only he can do, “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.”

For the follower of Jesus, *all of ethics, all of our decisions, all of our choices*, are *always rooted in and tempered by love and consideration for its impact on another*. We recognize that **the other is a member of our family and to act like we have no impact upon them, to refuse to acknowledge that we are connected, is a sin, a separating of ourselves, not just from them, but from Christ, in whom we all hold together**. Our knowledge, and the liberty that knowledge brings, without love, is **just another idol**. And the greatest liberty of all is the capacity *not* to exercise this right you have, the greatest liberty of all is the capacity to yield because **that other person is more important than the thing you think is rightfully yours**.

In this story, we often see ourselves as the *knowledgeable* one who needs to forego something, but *sometimes*, we are the *weaker* one who needs the other to meet us where we are. I experienced this recently on the choice “*to mask or not to mask*.” I needed to meet with someone; I wanted to meet with someone, but I wasn’t sure where they were with the whole masking thing. We were going to be outside, but I am quite simply very afraid of this virus. I am afraid for me and for my family and if I need to run up to KY and take care of my mom, I’m afraid for her, so *I’ve been really, really careful*. We had already set up the meeting, but all of this was gnawing at me. It took every ounce of courage for me to reach out to them and say, “*I know we’re going to be outside, but I really need to wear a mask. Would you be willing to wear a mask in this instance?*” They told me that they could cooperate with that.

I felt such relief, *but also*, it genuinely did something to my heart that they were *willing* to meet my weaker conscience right where it was, *even if they might ordinarily choose a different path*. They made a choice out of love for me and that is a humbling gift to receive. I think it also permeated the whole conversation that followed which was generous and curious and soft and holy. One of you shared a similar experience last Sunday in your moment closest to Christ as you shared about a conversation across the political divide that took place at your workplace.

It’s not just the big picture things that shift by choosing *not* to exercise a right for the sake of the other, but it’s the little imperceptible transformation that happens when love is extended and allowed to work it’s mystery in the deep places of our hearts and relationships; it’s the *being known by the other* that sees and knows that we are in this together and that you matter to me as a human being who is made in the image of God no less than I.

I wonder if we might start to loose some of our deeply entrenched positions, if we might start to dismantle some of the battle lines we have drawn, by being vulnerable enough to confess to one another where our conscience is *weak* and how we simply need someone to meet us where we are, *not for eternity*, but *for this one instance* where we hope our hearts could meet. And if *in that instance, we are the “knowledgeable” one to whom the need is brought*, if we could just hear the invitation to meet that person in that heart space, I wonder if the ground might start to shift under our feet and new possibilities open before us.

It’s not just about what we *know*, but it’s about our *willingness to be known*.

Paul *wasn't* just solving a dispute about food; he was inviting the Corinthians, and all of us, to see and know with the eyes of our heart rooted and grounded and tempered always by LOVE. It is that LOVE that moves us *from* the knowledge that puffs us up to the wisdom that doesn't need to prove a thing but simply knows what it knows, and in that *knowing* can extend a crazy kind of generosity.

Today, you may be the strong one with the *knowledge*, but tomorrow, you may be the one with the *weaker conscience*, confused by the plentitude of idols taking you down, who doesn't need *knowledge*, but so needs LOVE. *Ask* for that love with all the courage you can muster, *extend* that love with all the grace you can, and know that that LOVE will change you *and* the other, no matter how strong or weak you may be. Amen.

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