

Text: I Corinthians 8: 1-13
Title: Love Trumps Knowledge
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Jefferson Bethke posted a spoken word, poem, rap thing on You-Tube. There is nothing special about the video. It features Jefferson, a pleasant looking twenty-two year old, standing in front of an old building, clean bold text pops once in a while, there is a sort of haunting choir techno beat going on underneath.... and Jefferson performs his poem. But, this little video went viral and in the space of three weeks there have been over 17 million viewers. The poem is entitled, "Why I hate Religion, but love Jesus." Here is a snippet:

*They can't fix their problems, and so they just mask it
Not realizing religion's like spraying perfume on a casket.
See the problem with religion, is it never gets to the core
It's like behavior modification, like a long list of chores.
Like let's dress up the outside, make it look nice and neat
But it's funny, that's what they used to do to mummies
While the corpse rots underneath.
Now I ain't judging, I am just saying, quit putting on a fake look
Cause there's a problem if you're only a Christian on Facebook*

You get the idea ~ not the most subtle or sublime sonnet of the English language. But, it sparked all sorts of conversation, media attention, blog posts, and rebuttal videos. The two best that I've seen, one by a Muslim and one by a Catholic priest, both copy the style and offer thoughtful challenging responses.

One of the most common criticisms leveled against the young poet is that he neglects the church. He emphasizes the individual; when Jesus called together a family. As one writer puts it:

The notion that Christianity is just about "me and Jesus" is insufficient. Because while the church is the body, religion is the family. And a body is given life and lives most abundantly within the traditions, practices and relationships that set one family apart from another family, that make my family my family. Funny uncle and all.

Now on the surface our text this morning doesn't seem like much of a "1st century church ~ 21st century question." When was the last time you had a crisis of conscience over eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols?

But, what if it is really about loving Jesus and hating religion?
What if it is really about what traditions, practices and relationships set our family apart?
What if it is really about how do we love and follow Jesus in relationship to one another?
What if it is really about the relationship between Jesus and religion?

The Corinthians wrote to Paul with the meat question ~ remember this letter has a sort of call-in-radio-show quality to it. Our text is Paul's answer. So.....

It was common for meals to be served or celebrated in a temple. It was part of the social glue. Some of those meals would include a sacrifice to a pagan god. In turn, the leftover meat might be served to the guests or sold in the marketplace. To not eat the meat, to not partake in the meal,

was to be limited or cut off from common social interaction, but to eat the meat could signal acquiescence to a pagan god and a secular idolatry. Therefore the question.

Oh! And there is some indication that this was also a socio-economic issue. Meat was not an ordinary part of the diet of poor folks. The festivals where meat was served were a big deal. For the wealthy and better educated, meat was more commonplace. Therefore what to eat, what it symbolized, and how it functioned socially was also, at least in part, a socio-economic distinction. The well schooled wealthy were eating the meat, the poor and the pious weren't.....

This issue was no small matter. It pops up again and again in the New Testament. At the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 James gives Gentile converts a pass on circumcision, but explicitly states that they were to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to idols. In John's vision in Revelation 2 Christ condemns the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira for, among other things, eating meat sacrificed to idols. And, in chapter 10 of our letter (I Corinthians) Paul casts a much harder line about eating and drinking that which was sacrificed. Clearly this was a question for which the first century church didn't quite have the handle.

Paul's response is nuanced and (like last week) he quotes slogans that were familiar to the Corinthians and then offers a counter point.

Just when you think he would run up the flag of legalism; he waves a different banner.
Just when you think he is *laissez faire*; he offer a gentle firm hand of restraint.
And, just when you think he would appeal to scripture or the teaching of Jesus; he appeals to reason.

Paul's response in a nutshell:

There is only one God.
The gods and idols of this world are worthless.
Therefore the meat is incidental.
But....
And, this is a big but...

But, people are at different places with regard to understanding, journey, strength of relationship with God, and sense of self, place, and purpose. So, while the meat is fine to eat, Paul is worried about those who might eat it or see it eaten.

Some might stumble back into the sacrificial cults of idolatry.
Some need a clean break from the past and this is just too troublesome.
Some might know that it's not wrong, but it sure feels naughty.
Some might feel like they are backsliding and falling away from God.

So, Paul says, that while the meat is technically okay to eat if it hurts the spiritual health of others in the church ~ then those who belong to Christ need to skip the meat, for the sake of their brothers and sisters in Christ. And, this is not out of condescension, or self righteousness, or religious rigor, but out of the love ~ out of love for the other.

This is part of how we define our family:

Not by rules, but by relationships.
The boundaries are set not by do's and don'ts, but by love.
This is the religion of Jesus.
This is deep in the DNA of Hope.

Thanks be to God.

As Frank Crouch puts it:

Anyone who can only see "how right I am" and does not pause to consider the intrinsic value and worth of those who think and act differently misunderstands the heart of the gospel.

So far; so good. The trouble starts when we apply this lesson to other situations. The language is loaded. Who is puffed up with knowledge? Who is weaker? What is a stumbling block? Does every situation call for submission to the lowest common moral denominator?

For example, this text is often attached to the taking of strong drink.....

I was at a reception at an east coast Episcopalian seminary. The grand room featured beautiful walnut book shelves, over stuffed worn leather chairs, and gracefully aged rugs. Sherry, single malt scotch, fine wines, and beer for the socially awkward were served. Hors de'oeuvres were brought around by a white gloved wait staff. The conversation was restrained and polite. We prattled on about the relationship between social justice liturgy, who we were reading and where we were schooled.... And, we were so sure that they were right, erudite, and not uptight. We weren't like those repressed evangelicals, or those oppressive fundamentalists, or those oh-so-certain-Calvinists.

Calvinist, by the way, don't serve alcohol at seminary receptions or church radio shows, but many are quick to go down the street to the local tap because clearly Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding, and we're free in Christ, and a well poured craft beer is a motion of God's grace, and the fellowship around the table is an expression of the full bodied goodness of God's kingdom. Thanks be to God.

But, I can't shake my teetotaling Plymouth Brethren roots ~ my grandparents, and aunts and uncles, who wouldn't think of drinking. (Although I think my Grandmother kept a bottle of Mogan David in the cupboard for medicinal purposes.) They wouldn't drink for fear of offending God or leading a weaker one astray. The boundaries are set by belief and behavior.

At issue here is the danger of affixing the language and categories of our text, because as near as I can tell everyone is puffed up with knowledge and thinks they are doing right in the eyes of the Lord. And, I am not sure what translates into the slippery slope that slides a brother or a sister into drink. And, I'm not sure that the lesson here is that for the sake of the weaker brother we always move to the restrictions of religious rules.

Otherwise, what we do on the sabbath, dress and diet, ordination of women, understanding of sexual orientation, the welcome to the table, pronouns for God, etc..... Otherwise all of that defaults to the fear of offending others and we're easily held hostage to the standards of the most narrow minded and legalistic/literal members of the church.

So, how do we determine what it is that would cause others to stumble? What do we do with those expressions of freedom that make it more difficult for others in their journey with God? Where are we puffed up with knowledge? What if we're the weaker ones? How do we set family boundaries? Christ set aside self (emptied himself unto death) for the sake of the weaker ones (us). How then would we follow? What are we to make of this text?

I can't answer all of those questions, but let me offer some lines, some contours, some ways that we might faithfully define our family in Christ.

A few chapters later in this letter Paul writes that, "Love does not insist on its own way." And so, while we acknowledge that we are free, and we have certain understandings (knowledge), we know that we are not free to exercise our freedom willy-nilly. There are limitations to freedom imposed by love. How our actions impact the other is a primary factor in determining behavior. The health, the well-being of others, can take priority over knowledge and freedom.

That means that every member of the community be taken seriously, be respected, be honored, be listened to. We don't have the corner on knowledge. Good, bright, faithful followers of Christ will read and follow differently. May we have the humility to listen, not just to correct, but in order to learn. Love demands it.

And, sometimes, for the sake of the other.... We probably need to submit, not as those who are puffed up with knowledge, but as those who are prompted by love. Martin Luther in Freedom of a Christian writes that a follower of Christ is "a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none ... (and) a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

So, is it fair to ask, where are we puffed up and where can we empty?
Where can love put limits for the sake of the other?

Finally this: Paul's fear here was idolatry. It wasn't just that behaviors might offend the moral sensibility of a few; it was that followers of Christ might stumble back into idolatry. Richard B. Hayes gets at this way:

The seductive world lure of idolatry is real... If we are casual about dalliances with the idols that rule our culture's symbolic world (primarily the god's of wealth, military power, and self-gratification) we would do well to reread I Corinthians 8 and consider the possible risks for those among us who are seeking to escape the pull of these forces.

Maybe how we relate to consumption/consumerism, power/security, and the pursuit of self are the idols that pull us under. And those are a whole lot more prevalent and destructive than whether I like beer with pizza. And my guess is, if anybody is watching they care a whole lot more about money and might than they do about issues of personal morality.

There is so much more to wrestle with and consider, but....

Dear friends, you are free in Christ.

May we use our freedom as Christ used his, not puffed up but letting go, not to rule but serve.

May our traditions, practices and relationships honor the weak.

May our boundaries be defined by love.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.