

"For The Weaker Brother"  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

February 1, 2015

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After The Epiphany

Our culture seems almost obsessed with individual rights. We claim the right to do most anything we want to do. It doesn't matter how my actions affect you. If my right to do what I want offends you, then that's too bad. I have my rights! In the Church, the same issue comes up. Some will use the same terminology and say that we have individual rights to do as we please. Often, people will phrase it a bit differently and say, "I have freedom in the Gospel to do whatever I want and live however I please as long as it is not sinful and contrary to the Scriptures. If other people – even other Christians – are offended by what I do, that's too bad. I am free in Christ."

Now, something about that way of thinking sounds theoretically true, especially in our rights driven society. But something about it also sounds vaguely troubling. What are Christians to do when freedom in the Gospel clashes with people who are hurt or offended? That was the issue with the Church in Corinth in our epistle lesson for today.

Corinth was a very pagan city in Biblical times – probably more pagan than our society today. The Christian church met in homes surrounded by pagan temples where animal sacrifices were made to Greek goddesses. Some of the meat was burned up in the sacrifices. Some was served at meals in what amounted to 1<sup>st</sup> century "fellowship halls" attached to the temples. Some of the Corinthian Christians were attending these meals and eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols. These were nice dining places. The food was good. It was a sociable place to be. One commentator said it was like attending a fish fry in a Catholic parish hall. You aren't in the church, but you are close.

These people were doing nothing sinful at all. As Paul pointed out, they all knew that idols have no real existence. Although there are many so-called "gods" and "lords", the Corinthians knew that there is only one God, the Father, and only one Lord, Jesus Christ. Eating meat offered to non-

existent idols meant nothing. No harm could come from it. This was the argument of the Corinthians and Paul agreed with it.

Yet this exercise of Christian freedom was causing offense to other Christians in Corinth. Although the Corinthians who were strong in their faith knew the harmlessness and non-sinfulness of their actions, Paul points out that some Christians were weaker in faith and didn't have this knowledge. These people had previously worshiped in such temples and eaten such meat before converting to Christianity. Their conscience told them that having anything at all to do with their former religious lives was wrong. Watching their fellow Christians go to the dining halls next to the temple and participate in those meals was becoming a stumbling block to them in their faith.

While we don't have to deal with the question of animal sacrifices to idols and whether or not we can eat the left over meat, I do believe there is some application in here for us. Like the Corinthians, we live in a mostly pagan society. We are tempted, pressured, or choose to participate in behavior that non-Christians participate in. It may be the music we listen to or the TV programs and movies we watch. It may be consuming beer, wine, or hard liquor. It may be the clothes we wear – grubby or formal. It may be in the stuff we choose to buy - one writer called “the idolatry of materialism” or what our priorities are.

Assuming there are no sinful actions here (we are not talking about unlimited freedom here), each of us could make a case that we are doing nothing wrong by doing any of those things. In Christian freedom, we can enjoy these things without guilt.

Yet, like in Corinth, some people may be offended by our behavior. Maybe a new Christian who has been used to using his Sundays for playing has now learned about the importance of public worship and is anxious to do so, but sees you missing worship frequently. Suppose a Christian who is an alcoholic feels uneasy when beer and wine flowing freely at your house. Suppose an older Christian who is used to entertainment from a bygone era sees what you watch on TV and what movies you rent and is really bothered.

What do we do? The Corinthians basically said, “We enjoy these prestigious meals. We know we are not doing anything wrong. So we are going to keep on doing what we are doing and if anyone has a problem with that, too bad.” I think we get similarly annoyed with people who are offended by what we do. We live in such an individualistic society that to judge anyone is the highest sin. However, as Christians, we can make a sound Biblical case for what we are doing. We could say, “I enjoy what I’m doing. My doctrine is correct. My behavior is not sinful. I’m going to continue what I’ve been doing. If someone doesn’t like it, then that’s their problem.”

But Paul warns us about concentrating too much on knowledge. He is not saying it is bad to know clearly what is right or wrong, nor is he saying that correct doctrine is not important. He is saying that relying only on that knowledge puffs us up – makes us arrogant. If we use only our knowledge in leading our behavior, then we run the risk of wounding our brother’s conscience or, worse yet, destroying our brother’s faith. In doing that, we sin against our offended brothers and sisters and we sin against Christ.

Paul encourages us to think of our weaker brother. I’m going to encourage each of us to think of a Weaker Brother, but in a slightly different way than Paul. I’m thinking of a Brother who was quite strong and knowledgeable and right in everything He did. Yet He chose voluntarily to be the weakest of all. I’m thinking of our elder Brother Jesus Christ. Scripture says, Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus humbled Himself for us who are strong in faith and for those weak in faith. Jesus died for us who are knowledgeable about faith and Christian living and for those who do not have all of that knowledge yet. He did not have to do any of this for anyone. Yet out of love for those who are weaker than Himself (and that includes every single one of us), He chose to become weaker than all

of us. He did what was in our best interests, not His best interests. He did not hold on to His equality with God but took the form of a servant, obeyed His Father's will, and gave His life on the cross that we might be forgiven – all of us – young and old, man and woman, life long Lutheran and recent convert, those strong in the faith and those weak in the faith.

By His resurrection from the dead, we have been raised to new life. We are united in Him as the body of Christ. And that means we don't live as individuals, but we live as a group. What I do affects you and what you do affects me. The real point of our Scripture lesson and its application to our lives is not about meat offered to idols or how much beer we drink, what movies we watch, or what clothes we wear. It is how we live in community. We do not live just for ourselves and ignore how it affects others. Why? Not because we have to, but out of love for our brother. And why do we love our brother so much? Because he is a brother for whom Christ died. As one author put it, "If the Lord Jesus Christ had willingly sacrificed himself for the weakest brother, should [we] not also be willing to forego certain luxuries out of loving consideration for the brother?" (Lockwood, p.290)

What does this all mean? First of all, it doesn't mean that we have to give up everything we do because someone *might* be offended. If there is no offense, there is no need to adjust behavior. Secondly, if someone is offended, not in the sense of hurt feelings or disagreement, but in the sense of a crisis in faith or conscience, then we alter our behavior out of love for him or her. Paul says, "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." Thirdly, this doesn't mean we have to change our behavior forever. Through patient and loving instruction, we can help the brother or sister grow in faith and knowledge so that they are no longer offended.

Today is Super Bowl Sunday, the day staging and celebrating the championship of the National Football League. Supporters of Seattle want the "Legion of Boom" to crush pretty boy Tom Brady and the New England Patriots. Supporters of New England want the magnificent 6-time Super Bowl quarterback Tom Brady to pick apart the arrogant and rude Seattle Seahawks. By describing

the game that way, I'm intentionally emphasizing the highly competitive and self-centered nature which is necessary in football and every other sporting event in order to be successful. But such an attitude doesn't have to be and, in fact, should not be in the Church. Instead of dividing into "teams" and attempting to win when a conflict of conscience arises. Instead, let us unite as the Body of Christ and attempt to serve the weaker brother or sister. In doing so, we will be following our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who was strong yet became weak so that we who are weak might become strong, yet compassionate and caring for those who are yet weak. In that way, we all win. Amen.