

"To The Glory of God"
1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1

February 12,2012

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany

You don't even have to be a professional football fan to know the name of Tim Tebow, quarterback for the Denver Broncos. "Tebowmania" swept the country when this young man was promoted to first string quarterback and proceeded to win 7 of 8 games and then win a playoff game in a huge upset.

Tim Tebow is a likeable young man and an outspoken Christian, yet he has been a polarizing figure who has been at the center of controversy. Some debate his football skills. There are those who claim he does not have the requisite skills to be an NFL quarterback and are opposed by those who say, "All he does is win!" Some debate his religion. Some criticize him that he is using God to win football games. Others criticize him for using his religion to not care enough about winning, especially after his team was blown out of the playoffs by the New England Patriots.

However, if you actually listen to Tebow, you get a very different story. He doesn't believe that God wins football games for him and, while he is passionate about football, he admits that it is still only a game. What he prays for is that, whether he wins or loses, he would use the opportunity he has been given to glorify God. Despite all of the media attention he has been given and the culture of self-promotion and self-glorification of this age, Tim Tebow is not about glorifying himself, but doing all things, win or lose, to the glory of God.

That's what Paul encourages us to do in our text for today. He is addressing the people of Corinth who were having trouble in their life together as Christians. The immediate problem had to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols. Corinth was a very pagan city. Much of the meat butchered in the city or served at dinners had first been offered as sacrifice in a pagan temple. In his teaching in the chapters prior to our text, Paul admits that the idols are nothing and the sacrifice of animals to such non-existent deities means nothing. Therefore, some people said, "I have a right to eat meat sacrificed to idols. I can do what I want to do."

The problem was that some people who were weak in their faith were offended by such behavior. They felt that eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods was wrong and sinful. They felt that Christians shouldn't do such things. Their consciences were wounded. Those who were strong in their faith basically said, "Too bad! We are going to do what we want to do and have a right to do and if that offends you, that's your problem." Needless to say, this caused much strife and division when rights clash with compassion.

Not much has changed in over 2,000 years. People in the church today still demand the right to do certain things which are not sinful simply because they want to, regardless of how their actions affect other people. These things may have to do with practices within the church: how people dress, how people behave, how worship is conducted, and so on. These things may have to do with certain moral behavior: the consumption of alcohol, dancing, or participation in politics.

Some Christians will see that such things are not wrong and do such things, saying, "I have a right to do these things." Some Christians are offended by this. And, by this, I don't mean that they just don't like the behavior in question or it's not their preference. Their consciences tell them that such behavior is something that Christians shouldn't do and, were they to do it, would believe they were sinning.

Those who are strong in their faith or simply have the majority of people on their side will say, "Too bad! We want to do this. We have a right to do this. If that bothers you, that's your problem." Much of the strife and division we have comes about as a result of such behavior and of such a reaction to the behavior.

What's the answer? Like every question asked in a children's sermon, the answer is Jesus, but not in the way you might think. We are not to simply use Jesus to support our position and show that other positions are wrong. Sometimes we do have to do that, but here we are not talking about actions and positions that are morally or theologically wrong. We are talking about the clash of rights taken with offense given.

Jesus is the answer to this problem because of who He is and what He has done. He knows nothing of rights, but only of service. In discussing the incarnation of Jesus, Paul writes in Philippians, “[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:6-7) Jesus did not take advantage of the rights He had as the Son of God, but made Himself out to be nothing.

He did this in order that He might serve us completely for that is the reason He came. It wasn't easy. Jesus, although He had the right to do things, did not live to please Himself. Romans says, “For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” It was completely selfless. Jesus, although He could demand our service of Him, chose instead to serve us. Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)

This runs counter to our present world's emphasis on rights and self-glorification. However, Jesus was, in fact, doing what needed to be done to glorify God. After riding triumphantly into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” One might have expected to follow up with plans for a political or military overthrow. Yet Jesus goes on to say, “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:23-24) In other, Jesus is glorified and gives glory to His Father by coming to die.

So, Jesus died, unwanted by His people, deserted by His friends and followers, and rejected by His Heavenly Father. Yet, in this selfless serving action, Jesus was bringing together those who had been divided by sin.

First, there was the great division between a holy God and sinful people. The Bible declares, “[God] reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,” (2 Cor. 5:18-19) By Jesus' death, we are at peace with God.

Secondly, there is the division among people which causes all the conflict about rights and who can do what. Paul writes to the Ephesians, “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (Eph. 2:14-16) By Jesus’ death, we are also at peace and at one with each other.

By Jesus’ resurrection to new life, we have received new life through our baptism into His resurrection. We are changed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to now live different lives together – lives which are not bound up in rights and self-glorification but in service to the other and the glorification of God. Paul calls on the people to imitate him as he imitates Christ. Paul is not talking about being “holier than thou” in living, but in taking on the attitude of Christ: “giving up one’s rights for the sake of the ‘advantage of many others. It is a pattern rooted in the love of God manifested in Jesus, who gave himself up for the sake of others.” (Grothe in Lockwood, p.355)

This means we do not base our action on what pleases us or even on what we have a right to do, but on what best serves our neighbor. This is what gives glory to God. This is also very difficult. We can never give up doing what God has clearly commanded simply because it offends people. That’s not what we are talking about. We are talking about our freedom as Christians to do certain things which God has not forbidden or are not sinful. Conflict over what to do in any given situation must be struggled with. We should always approach any situation with the words Paul gave to the Philippians: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (Phil. 2:3-4)

In our text, Paul says, whatever our course of action might be, we are to “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.” He’s not referring here to offensive behavior per se. He is saying that we are to do nothing that will lead fellow Christians into sinning against conscience.

The Jews, who lived under the Law of Moses, could be alienated by an excessive exhibition of freedom. The Greeks, who did not live under the Law of Moses, could be offended by a display of legalistic behavior. The church of God likely means brothers weak in faith who could be led into sin by the poor example of fellow Christians. The concern for the brother is to be supreme, as it was for Jesus. In fact, prior to our text, Paul goes so far as to say, "When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall." (1 Cor. 8:12-

Paul says we are to "please everyone in everything [we] do, not seeking [our] own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." He does not mean we should try to make everyone happy. In fact, in several places throughout his epistles, he specifically stated that his goal was not to make people happy. What he means is that we will sacrificially seek the good of the other, regardless of what sacrifice that means on our part, in order to save him or her. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up." (Romans 15:1-2)

One of the things which made the Tim Tebow story so captivating is that people are looking for someone who lives out their faith by glorifying God in all circumstances and not themselves. Let us, by the power of the Holy Spirit within us, be that kind of people. Let us live, not to glorify ourselves, but God. Let us choose our actions, not based on our rights, but on the basis of serving our neighbor. In doing that, we will be giving all glory to God. Amen.