

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Year B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalms 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Since eating meat offered to idols is not an issue for us today, what is Paul trying to tell the 21st century church? Is this about more than eating meat for us as well as for the early church? Obviously, the answer to this question is yes and the answer to the first question is what we are going to explore.

Even at the time Paul wrote these words, he was not really addressing the issue of eating meat offered to idols. While there was a controversy about this in the church in Corinth, Paul uses this question to address a far more important problem - how we treat our fellow believers. That was the underlying problem in Corinth in the first century and it remains a problem for the church today.

At the heart of Paul's philosophy about the internal workings of the church is the Jewish prayer known as the Shema, the prayer all Jews begin and end their day - "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." We know this from Jesus' answer to the question about which commandment is the most important, although He changed the last word to "mind". To this, Jesus added the second commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This is the core of Paul's message in this passage.

The problem of eating meat that had been offered to idols was, for some of the members, a gateway back to their previous life when they worshipped those idols. Part of that worship entailed eating the sacrificial meat. These members wanted to distance themselves from that previous practice, but were hindered by those who did not have that problem. Hence the controversy.

Paul reminds us of our obligation to build up one another in the faith. While eating meat offered to idols is not an issue for us, what might we be doing in our lives that would be detrimental to one of our brothers or sisters? Holding a prayer meeting in a bar might be problematic for someone who is a recovering alcoholic. Of course, there are other examples we could use, but this is the point Paul is trying to make. We should be mindful of how our behavior impacts others.

The point some of the members of the Corinthian Church make that the idols have no spiritual power is a distraction. When knowledge becomes the avenue of diminished love for our neighbor, that knowledge is the heart of the problem. Knowledge that appears to be factual is to be contrasted with real knowledge that is based on a true understanding of God. Apparent knowledge puffs up. Having spent most of my life on college campuses, where degrees that display knowledge are fundamental to the status one might have on the campus, this concept of

being puffed up by knowledge is readily apparent. But true knowledge that builds up our fellow believers is the testament of God's love at work within us.

If we have to constantly be watching everything we say and do for fear of hurting someone else's feelings, where does the freedom we are to have in Christ fit in? Our country glorifies freedom. We enshrined this in the Bill of Rights. But no freedom is absolute. The old saying that your right to strike out ends at my nose is a case in point. We can't just yell "fire" in a crowded theater if there is really no fire. We all know these common sense restrictions on our freedoms. Paul is making the same point to the "stronger" Corinthians. Our freedoms must be tempered with love.

Love - of God and of our neighbor - needs to be the guiding light of our actions. If our plan of action might cause someone else to stumble, we need to rethink our plan. If our words might be a hindrance to someone else's spiritual growth, we need to watch what we say. God has called us to build up our neighbors, not tear them down. Love is to be the core motivation of everything we say and do. It should govern our worship, our ministries, and our relationships to everyone we meet. We are to be all about love.