

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

Jan 31, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

8 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3 but anyone who loves God is known by him.

4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 “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. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if others see you, who possess 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? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 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.

Prayer & Sermon

Gracious and Loving God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

I know all of you have really been wanting this crucial question answered. I know it's been on your mind every time you go to the meat section of the grocery store. What about the meat sacrificed to idols? Should we buy it? Should we eat it? Obviously, this is clearly a burning question we all have today.

Alas, no. This is one of those passages that when we look at it from the surface, it would be easy to dismiss it as something that is not at all relevant to us today. Meat sacrificing is far from common practice now. We mostly buy meat from grocery stores now, and even if we don't there is no concern that farmers are sacrificing their cows to other gods or idols before butchering it for sale. So, the question that the Corinthians had when sending their letter to Paul, that Paul answers with what we now call 1 Corinthians, that probably went something like, "We haven't been able to come to a consensus between us, should we or should we not eat that meat? We know we should not worship other gods... but all of us Christian believers know that those sacrifices don't have any power since those gods are bunk, so we should be allowed to eat all that meat guilt free. But not everyone among us agrees."

Paul's response here is not direct, unlike other places in his letters. But for this question, he responds instead by giving them the tools for them to make the decision themselves. Which makes his advice much easier to decipher and apply to ourselves today.

In the first half of the passage, Paul focuses on breaking down a motto or saying typical of Corinth at the time, "All of us possess knowledge." Paul does this through typical teaching tactics of the time, by not denying that claim outright, but clarifying what it should mean by adding his own sayings to the mix. Paul's major point here is that we should prioritize love over knowledge. Paul says that knowledge puffs up, which he is probably particularly focusing on because he knows the people of Corinth well, and he knows that they have been dealing with an arrogance problem. So when they wrote, telling Paul what they know about the meat issue, over anything else, he hears the way they are using their knowledge as a status symbol or way to rank the believers. I'm sure you have all experienced someone in a class when you were in school who raised their hand to ask a question, but leading up to the question they showed off all they knew for everyone to hear, and then brought up their uber-specific or insignificant question. Based on Paul's response, we can guess that this is the way the Corinthians were asking about the meat. They were making knowledge claims to make the few of them writing the letter look good to Paul with the hopes that Paul would agree and they could look even better to their community. Paul is speaking directly to them, your focus on knowledge over all else puffs you up, but you should be focusing on love that builds up the community.

This is particularly powerful because of the deeper meaning that the idea of knowledge held for those that would have been asking this question. Back then, they understood knowledge as what leads to virtue, to proper behavior, which means it also defines and enhances freedom. So, their claim of “all of us possess knowledge” is not just a claim of smarts, but asserting that they have freedom and control over what is permissible. Paul is calling out this way of thinking as one that allows for them to be self-centered in their moral decisions, showing no concern for how their resulting actions could affect someone else who does not have the same knowledge of what is permissible.

To clarify here, based on the rest of Paul’s writings that speak highly of knowledge and wisdom and the importance of them too, Paul is not condemning the entirety of knowledge. He is not saying that knowledge is inherently bad or wrong. He is giving us a more nuanced take on knowledge, that it can become bad when it is not rooted in the right intentions or a foundation of love for others.

Just in these first 3 verses Paul leaves us with a powerful lesson. We should center our actions and attitudes on love and let love be the foundation that we build knowledge off of. Furthermore, that love stems from us loving God and being known by God in return, and then our knowing will be based in God’s love and our knowing will be through that perspective.

Paul brings his big philosophical talk back to earth with verses 4-6, bringing it back to the question of food offered to idols. He acknowledges that they are right, that the food being sacrificed to other idols doesn’t mean much of anything as those gods do not exist, so we know that nothing happened to that meat and so there isn’t anything wrong with eating it.

This is where Paul turns it back on the ones asking the question again. Paul has acknowledged that their logic is correct, but that ultimately, not everyone who is part of their Christian community have gotten to the point in their faith journey to understand or know that the sacrificed meat is fine to eat, as they are still accustomed to their old ideas that sacrificed meat was defiled. He goes on to say, though it is fine to eat it, there is also no reason anyone has to eat it. Eating meat sacrificed to other gods is not taking anything from those fake gods and it doesn’t bring them closer to the real God. So, since eating the meat is a neutral thing for an individual’s faith, Paul encourages them to think about the question in a deeper way. With his first lesson in mind, to center our moral decisions and actions on love and build knowledge from there, Paul instructs them to look outside of their individual faith experience with the meat and to think about what eating the sacrifice meat will do for the faith walks of those in the community not as far along on their journey. If those not as far along on their journey don’t yet understand the sacrificed meat as powerless, seeing others eat it could throw them off their journey. They may believe the believers eating the meat to be hypocrites or offensive and not want to continue as part of the community. Paul makes the strong claim that if you are the cause of delaying someone else’s faith journey, that is a sin against Christ. So, Paul’s parting piece of wisdom on the subject is that if that meat “is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.” Pulling Paul’s lesson out of the specific context of the sacrificed meat, Paul is telling them that giving up a piece of his freedom is completely worth it if it means preventing others from falling away from their faith. Through this whole passage, Paul tells us that when we center love in our moral decision making we think about more than just

ourselves and we should stick to acting on things that will build up the whole community and not puff up just a few.

When we boil down his message, it might feel pretty straight-forward and even obvious. But what Paul is teaching here is really quite radical, especially for us in the United States that is particularly individualistic, valuing independence and self-reliance and laws that give freedom of action for individuals. Paul is taking a stance against appeals to individual rights that put the wellbeing of others at stake. Paul is calling us to think about the consequences of our decisions and recognize that what might be fine or good for us could have significant negative effects for others. He is calling us to a different way of living life that connects us and our actions inextricably to the rest of the community. He reminds us that God knows us and as we focus on love, God transforms us toward living out of love more and more to share God's love in our community.

There are plenty of ways that we can apply these teachings to the way we live out our faith today. While discussing this scripture, there are some classic applications to modern issues or practices. For example, our practice in the UMC to use grape juice for communion instead of wine is a choice following this teaching (among others) recognizing that the technicality of wine over grape juice is not worth the harm that being around alcohol or having to take it causes those struggling with alcoholism. The importance of taking the sacrament as a united body of Christ, centering on that universal love of Christ, is more important than the fermentation of some grapes. Another popular example is the use of profanity, there is a wide range of opinions on the morality of using profanity, and for many it is quite offensive or distracting to hear profanity. For those that have come to the similar belief as the Corinthians as the curse words don't hold any power, Paul reminds us that perhaps the greater purpose of what is being said is more important than getting to include a four letter word. There are plenty more examples of personal choices and frivolous things.

This year, though, we have become all too familiar with some life-altering choices to show love for our community over our desire for personal freedom. We have had to make hard choice after hard choice this year for the greater good of others. Community shut-downs, masks, limiting outings, cancelling gatherings and events, washing our hands until our skin is dry, not singing in church, I know the list could go on forever. Paul teaches us here in 1 Corinthians 8 that no matter what our beliefs are about COVID and what our knowledge tells us, we must persist in making choices centered on what will be the most truly loving to all peoples. It feels a bit ironic that this is the lesson that came up in the lectionary for this week, this week that we made the choice to come back to worshiping in-person. Honestly, in reflecting on it this week, I pondered if we were living out the lesson ourselves as a church in this move. It's a fair question, and one that I think Paul intended, as this lesson encourages us to think through the true consequences of our choices. And it is with that last part that I feel affirmed and want to affirm all of you. We did not make the choice to come back to in-person lightly. Our Ad Board wrestled with the idea, wrestled with our concerns and our optimistic wishes. Ultimately, we came to decide with a lot of peace in our hearts, that to best share our love for each other, that it is time to ease back to in-person gathering with virtual as a continued option, with all safety precautions in place, but ultimately to give the opportunity to be in community together is needed. It has been the longest year with so

much time apart, being farther from each other makes it harder to think outside of ourselves, to think about the way we impact our greater community. Though Zoom does okay, nothing compares to being together in our sacred sanctuary together, and it is from these sacred gatherings that we will continue to be renewed by God to recenter ourselves on functioning from love instead of knowledge and status. And that is why we choose to come together. To remind ourselves that we are so important as a community and we function together as a community instead of away from each other on our own. So I pray that we continue to live that out, live out Paul's lesson of living together in community and growing together, loving each other and putting love in the center and not knowledge and status. Let it be so.

Let us pray.

We think we know so much, O God, and with our meager knowledge we presume to judge others. We arrogantly announce our own righteousness without a compassionate thought. We proclaim your word when it suits us and often only to those with whom we want to associate. We shut others out because of our faulty judgment and our blindness. There have been so many times in which our humble help would have been a blessing to someone, but we have placed our comforts before serving others. In the competing voices of today's world, we have turned around and around, trying to find the way to live. Help us, merciful God, to again listen to you. Help us to truly open our hearts to you. Remind us again of your great love and presence in our lives. Forgive us our foolishness and our stubbornness. Create in us new spirits, filled with your love, offering peace and hope to all. In Jesus' Name we pray. AMEN.