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1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Being the Body of Christ

The Apostle Paul and I have had a few wrestling matches over the years. It would not surprise you to know that I have not always agreed with some of the things he has had to say, especially around the area of women's leadership in church and/or place in the home. He just plain frustrates me sometimes. In one part of a letter he will seem to be challenging my God-given call to speak in the church. But in a different part of the same letter, he will announce with great passion that all of us make up the one body of Christ and we have all been given different gifts for the sole purpose of building up the body in love.

And I think he frustrates me because Paul is usually trying to do two things at the same time. He always tries to help his people think theologically or doctrinally; let's call it big-picture faithfulness. But he also tries to respond pastorally to particular church situations; let's call it situational faithfulness. And sometimes, those two responses do not go hand-in-hand. Therefore, as theologian J. Christiaan Beker writes, "Paul risks the charge of inconsistency, because there is no doctrinal principle or yardstick by which we can decide in advance when and where 'principle' prevails over 'situation,' or 'truth of the gospel' prevails over 'the unity' of the church."¹

This is the tension in today's text. Now- I realize that this chapter in Corinthians sounds like a weird part of the letter to preach. I agree. It is strange to our ears. Meat sacrificed to idols? Eating as a possible stumbling block for faith? In our day and in our time, it is an odd debate to overhear. And yet, I am convinced it is crucial that we overhear it now, at this time in our history as a denomination.

But first let me set the stage and offer a brief explanation of the context for this letter. Paul did in Corinth as he has had done in other cities—he started a church. And, as he had in other places, he stayed for a while, probably around eighteen months, so that he could impress upon the newly converted the importance of living their faithⁱⁱ. Paul always focused on living out the Lordship of Christ in all that one said and did-- at home, in the marketplace, and certainly, as a faith community.

But in addition to getting their theological house in order, Paul had to get their actual church house in order too. Paul was THE building committee, stewardship committee, Christian Education committee and Officer Nominating Committee all rolled into one. And because he had all that work and very little time in each new church he started, Paul ended up doing a lot of ministry via letters. And we have many of those letters gathered up as a part of our Scripture. From Paul's responses, it seems that the churches would make up a list of questions (and/or complaints) and send them to him for his wisdom and guidance.

That appears to be the case for this church in Corinth, Greece. Their letter (which we do not have) must have been line after line of questions, because Paul spends at least 14 out of the 16 chapters trying to tackle specific church fights while offering general theological guidance. And this chapter, chapter 8, stands right in the center of the letter.

On the surface – here is the issue: Some members of the Corinthian church wanted to be free to eat food that they knew had been used in the worship of pagan idols. The city of Corinth was

chock-full of paganism and temples to this god or that god. That was the Greek culture and the dominant religion. Many of the people in the new Corinthian church had come from that culture and religious upbringing.

Plus, the only social areas for gathering were banquet halls that were attached to these pagan temples. And so if you bought meat in the marketplace (that is where it would go if it were not eaten at the ceremony), or, if you attended a social event, it was inevitable that you would eat food that had been sacrificed in idol worship.

Now, for some members in the Corinthian church, this was not an issue. They felt strong and grounded in their faith. They knew there was only one true God and that those idols were not divine. Therefore, regardless of where the meat had been, the meat was just meat and they did not want to waste good food. Their knowledge of the Gospel gave them the freedom not to worry about it anymore.

But, just like in every church, there were other people in the Corinthian church who felt differently. They, too, felt strong and grounded in their faith. But they believed that if they were to eat that meat, it would lessen their devotion to God. Furthermore, they believed that it would be a shaky witness to new Christians because it made it look like idol worship could go hand in hand with Christianity. You see the struggle. So, both sides wanted Paul to tell them who was right and who was wrong. They needed to know.

First thing Paul says in response: I know that all of you possess knowledge. But know this—**knowledge puffs up but love builds up.** Ouch. That is a zinger right off the bat. Paul wants to make sure that all of them who feel absolutely certain that they have it right, that their way is the correct way- the faithful way, that they are the strong ones—Paul wants all of them to do an arrogance check. “Anyone who claims to know with certainty,” Paul says, “does not have the necessary knowledge. But someone who loves God is known by God.” God is the one who knows all, the omniscient one—not you.

After that introductory zinger, Paul then continues to hold the tension between strong theological beliefs with the call to love one another. From a purely theological standpoint, Paul agrees that eating the meat is not a problem. It is not a diminishment of one’s loyalty to Christ. But, from a love of neighbor standpoint, Paul concludes that eating the meat is not worth it. For even though those who were worried about eating the food were theologically incorrect, love for one another had to take precedence over principles.

In this specific case, Paul indicates that those who worried about the meat were weaker in their faith and might more easily stumble. Therefore, they needed all the help they could get. “So those of you who feel that you are the strong ones,” he writes, “this freedom that comes from your certainty is going to have to take a back seat to your love for your brother or sister in faith.” As a follower of Christ, it is more important to be loving than it is to be right.

As a follower of Christ, it is more important to be loving than it is to be right. This Pauline conviction should not surprise us. This is the same letter that contains the words “Love does not insist on its own way.” As the President of my seminary has preached, “And so while we acknowledge the importance of knowledge and of freedom [in our faith], we also acknowledge that what must determine our behavior is our love for one another. We are not free to think only

of our own response to a situation. We have to take in account those affected by our actions... There are limitations imposed by love.”

I am not sure how many of you keep up with denominational politics and decisions, but the heat is starting to ratchet up here in Grace Presbytery again. Just as we have for at least thirty or so years, we are continuing to debate whether or not someone’s sexual orientation should be a barrier for ordination to elder, deacon or minister. As it stands now, people who are gay or lesbian are to be fully welcomed into membership in the Presbyterian church as long as they profess faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

But, they are not able to be ordained unless they are committed to a life of celibacy. In a decision at last summer’s General Assembly, the part of the Book of Order called “Amendment B” – an amendment that has codified this boundary for ordination-- was voted out and replaced by something that took the boundary away. But in the PCUSA, a majority of Presbyteries have to agree with the Assembly’s action before a change in the Book of Order actually happens. So right now, all over the country, Presbyteries are gearing up again for this important conversation.

But herein lies the problem. It is really not a conversation. Instead, what typically happens is that we all come to Presbytery, line up at the microphones, toss our verbal grenades at the other side, and then vote to determine the winners and the losers. And afterwards, some people leave the church. Others retreat to their trenches. Lots of people stand wounded. And we once again hit the headlines as a fractured, fighting church.

But this time, some of us wondered if we could do it differently. Some of us wondered if there was a way not to only think about our own response, but to also take into account those affected by our actions...if there were some limitations imposed by the command to love one another. And so, a few of us wondered if we could vote not to vote, to take no action, and then see if we could go about the hard work of intentionally building trust and relationships between people who for so long have only been known as “the other side” or “enemy.” (By the way – the GA tried to get us all to do this at least 5 years ago and it really did not happen to a great extent here in Grace Presbytery.)

But I am part of an effort to try and make such a thing happen now. And I am joined in the effort by pastors on both the right and the left. We are having many, many conversations with one another wondering if this kind of leadership could have a positive, lasting effect in Grace Presbytery. If this kind of effort to reach out to one another could change the tone of the “kill or be-killed” debates, into a tone of dialogue into, eventually, a tone of loving conversation between kin.

But I have to tell you—I wrestle with it because of my theological viewpoint, my theological knowledge. I wrestle with this no action stance because, technically, it is a “no” vote. And I am sure it comes as no surprise to most of you that I personally would love to get rid of Amendment B. I believe strongly that it is faithful to open the ordination door to all whom God calls regardless of sexual orientation. I feel that is what Scripture has led me to believe is right. Some of you agree with me, others of you don’t- and that is fine because I am still your pastor and you are still my people.

But, I also know another pastor working with me on this wrestles with this no action stance too. But he wrestles with it because he wonders if a vote of no action weakens Amendment B, an amendment that he strongly supports. For just as I feel certain that taking it out would be faithful, he feels just as certain that taking it out would be unfaithful, that the boundaries need to be kept in place.

Now, in our normal ways of doing things, I would not know that he, too, wrestled with it. Because he would be on one side at the microphone and I would be on the other. He would be arguing it as a purity issue. I would be arguing it as a justice issue. Neither of us would listen to the other one and we would certainly not be having lunch together next week.

But both of us feel convicted by Paul's words to the Corinthians. Granted, Paul was talking about something very different, but it was still the tension between theological certainty and the call to love one another. The tension between believing with all your heart that you are right about this and that it is very important, but also believing with all your heart that you have been called into being the body of Christ with people who feel just as strongly from the opposite viewpoint **and furthermore**, you have been commanded by God to love one another.

We both feel convicted by Paul's words that when we wound each other, we are wounding Christ. And goodness knows there has been enough wounding in the past 30 years to go around. Good, faithful people have been hurt and some driven out of the church-- gay people, straight people, conservatives, liberals, a whole lot of moderates. So much of the debate has focused more on being right than on being loving that we have forgotten we are talking about and talking to kin, sisters and brothers in Christ.

I am not sure what is going to happen when this comes to Presbytery in March. I am not sure if the tone will be changed or not, if people will really agree to meet in theologically diverse small groups for a year or not. And we don't know what happened in Corinth either. We don't know if the one group stopped eating meat or if the other group split off and tried to take their property. We don't know how it all ended.

But what we do know is this—something Paul writes later in this same letter to the Corinthians: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews, Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit...Now **y'all are** the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Perhaps the Corinthians finally learned how to live that out. And I pray to God that we will too. In Jesus Christ, we have good hope.

ⁱ Beker, J. Christiaan. Paul the Apostle. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, page 311.

ⁱⁱ Craddock, Fred. Interpretation