

Spiritual Correctness

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

January 29, 2012

I.

My sermons often are about the Gospel reading for the day. Today I would like to depart from that practice and talk about the New Testament reading, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

But not entirely, and not yet. Something in today's Gospel is worth noting. Jesus encountered a man possessed by a demon, and the demon cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Most people today probably have not heard demons cry out in fear. But demons don't fear us like Jesus. Although evil spiritual forces have for centuries tried to separate us from God, they knew the truth about Jesus and that he carried God's power with him. That's why we pray that our Lord and Savior will protect us from the enemy's temptations.

And our reading from First Corinthians is a transition from real supernatural powers to false ones. It also might be the original story about political correctness, or at least spiritual correctness. And just as political correctness has its place but can be overused, today's reading contains a useful message that also can be applied beyond its intended purpose.

We can begin with some background. At the time of Paul's letter, Corinth was the commercial center and crossroads of Greece. It was a typical Greek city where wisdom and knowledge were valued. It also was a center of pagan practices and foreign gods that had become established in local culture. Ritual sacrifices to the many idols they worshipped were common.

And those sacrifices were quite different from Jewish sacrifices described in the Old Testament, which were commanded by the one God and carried out in a faithful way. Greek sacrifices to pagan idols were contrary to Scripture, without meaning, and condemned by Jews and Christians.

And when these sacrifices and offerings of animals and food were made, there usually was a lot left over. The quantity actually used in the sacrifices was small. So the people who offered the sacrifices frequently hosted sometimes boisterous feasts to use up the rest.

This led some of the Christians in Corinth to ask Paul whether it was permissible for Christians to attend these pagan feasts and eat food, principally meat, that had been sacrificed or offered to idols. Would they be engaging in idolatry if they did?

II.

That's a good question, isn't it? Could Christians, who rejected idols, eat meat that had been sacrificed during worship of idols? And Paul gave a conditional "yes." He said yes--but; or yes--if; or yes--however. There always seem to be a catch, doesn't there? Let's see what it is.

Paul, in typical Greek fashion, set the stage for his answer by describing two different types of knowledge. He made a distinction between arrogant and prideful knowledge that is self-centered, and discerning knowledge of God's truth expressed in love to others. Please keep this distinction in mind. We will come back to it.

Then he answered the question and said that because idols only symbolized gods that did not exist, food offered to those idols could not be spiritually tainted by non-existent entities. Since idols are nothing, he reasoned, food offered to idols still is ordinary food. To say that it could not be eaten would be to give authority to those false gods. Instead, they should be ignored.

But then Paul added the fine print. He said that while the food itself was spiritually neutral, the knowledge and beliefs people had on the question was important. This worked two ways.

At one level, Paul acknowledged that strong Christians, who truly understood that food offered to meaningless idols was not corrupted, could go ahead and eat it without fear of idol worship. They knew that idols meant nothing. For them it was just another meal.

But at another level, Paul was concerned about those who recently had come to Christ, and still recalled when they used to worship idols. He worried that as they were growing in faith, they could be misled by learning that other respected Christians ate food from those sacrifices.

So the end result was that even though meat sacrificed to idols could be eaten by those who understood that there was no spiritual significance to it, they should refrain from doing so if it could cause other people, who did not fully understand, to be weakened in their faith

And you might imagine that Paul's answer, and the distinction he made, has been used throughout the centuries to justify both righteous and unrighteous actions.

III.

Here is an example that might illustrate the difference. At a recent clergy conference at the Gray Center I heard a priest say that he always removed his clerical collar before going into a liquor store. Even though he had an absolute right to wear it, he worried that someone in the store might be struggling with their faith and could get the wrong impression about religion.

But another priest took issue, and good-naturedly suggested that some hypocrisy was at work. He wondered if the priest who removed his collar simply did not want other people to know that as a man of the cloth he purchased liquor. But the first priest said following the Bible was not hypocrisy. Then the second priest said the Bible does not mention liquor stores. And on it went.

Nothing was resolved, however, and probably nothing could have been resolved. Answers to such questions rest in our hearts. But you can see how Paul's dilemma two thousand years ago can apply to other aspects of our lives.

And here is another example. I don't know if anything like this actually has happened, so we'll treat it as a hypothetical case study. Let's assume that you are driving and pull up behind another car stopped at a traffic light. And you notice that the car in front has a bumper sticker that says, "Honk, if you love Jesus." You probably have seen them.

So you, being a good Christian who loves Jesus, enthusiastically lay on the horn. And the driver of the car in front immediately raises his right hand in a contemporary well-known sign of disrespect. At that moment you realize the red light had turned green just before you honked.

Let's analyze this situation and start with ourselves; those of us who honked the horn without anticipating that it could be misunderstood. Certainly we had a right to do what we did, but shouldn't we have been more aware of our circumstances rather than simply reacting? We might have been somewhat thoughtless in showing our faith.

And what about the driver of the car in front? He certainly forgot about his bumper sticker and the Christian invitation it extended. By having that bumper sticker on his car he held himself out as a Christian example, even while he was stopped at a red light. And his anger or frustration did not honor the image he presented.

We can see two lessons here, can't we? When we express our faith to other people we certainly don't want to receive the response given by the fellow in the front car.

And if we had been the driver of the front car, we would want to be aware that when we identify ourselves as Christians, even with bumper stickers, people can have expectations that we will conduct ourselves accordingly, even if others approach us in the wrong way at the wrong time.

IV.

Perhaps by now we have an idea of Paul's intent when he wrote this letter. But we also are called to take this reading for what it is, and neither apply it where it was not intended, nor fail to apply it where applicable.

To do this we can return to the different types of knowledge Paul mentioned in the reading. One type goes like this. "I know what's right and wrong. I'm a good Christian and I'll do what I think is right. If others don't understand, that's their problem."

Here's the other type. "I know I have a right to do these things, but I also know that others might misunderstand and get the wrong impression. I don't want that to happen, and so I won't do these things even though I can."

Paul labeled these two types of knowledge for us. One is expressed in pride, and "puffs up." The other is expressed in love, and "builds up." One is a stumbling block, while the other is a building block. I think it's easy to see which is which.

For me, I have found some helpful ways of remembering that distinction. One is to follow an old rule of my grandfather's. He said, "If it feels good, don't do it." That applies when I might feel vindication or satisfaction from doing or saying something that shows I am right at someone else's expense. Whether I always am able to follow that rule is a different question.

Another way is to hopefully catch myself when I start talking to myself about something, arguing with myself, trying to justify something to myself. In those cases it's usually a good idea to stop, take a deep breath, and think again.

And we all probably notice similar things in ourselves or others. We want something to be a certain way, and so we convince ourselves of it in our own minds, then say it out loud a few times, and think that it has become true.

Paul's letter, however, calls us to a different standard. He asks us to reflect Christ's love in what we do even though a natural human response might be to do something more self-serving. The examples of our lives might be the only Bible some people have seen. If we want them to come closer to the Lord, we must pay attention to how we witness to them.

V.

Today's reading began with a story about what kind of food early Christians could eat, and the circumstances under which they could do it. But it goes beyond that for us. We also are to apply Paul's words to how we present ourselves as Christians as we invite others into the faith.

And we do that by extending ourselves to people in loving appreciation of their circumstances, so that instead of being puffed up we can build up. We take their interests into account as we think about our own. I believe we try to that here at St. Thomas with ourselves and others.

But in the end, we walk a very fine line between vanity and humility, between pride in ourselves and love of others. Winning the argument or scoring a point sometimes is not as important as the relational issues at stake. Sometimes it is not just a matter of being right, but doing the right thing. *Amen.*