

January 28, 2018
Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

“You as Proclamation”

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Brothers and sisters redeemed by Christ—today’s epistle lesson needs a bit of explanation, so I’ll read it again. *“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—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. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”*

Paul is responding to a letter and addressing some question or controversy that has come up in Corinth. Paul elsewhere makes it explicit that Christians cannot eat meat sacrificed to idols as part of and participation in a pagan worship service. But here it seems that he is talking about surplus meat from those sacrifices; meat that might be served at a public cafeteria of sorts attached to a pagan temple or even sold at market.

Apparently, those Christian who considered themselves knowledgeable in the faith had no problem eating such meat, knowing it was just meat and the idols it had been sacrifice to were false gods. However, in doing so they weren’t considering the impact their behavior had on new converts from paganism who see them do this and who might still think those idols and sacrifices have something to them. In this the mature weren’t showing love to the new believers, weren’t looking out for them.

You all have knowledge. You have the knowledge that your sins stand forgiven by Christ’s absolution, by His body and blood in the Supper, by virtue of your Holy Baptism. Y’all are in the set of mature believers. You are here regularly hearing the Word, receiving the Sacrament, singing God’s praise. Whether you actually think of yourself as possessing knowledge in spiritual things doesn’t matter; others think you do. You are an example to a new believer or a believer weak in the faith. St. Paul’s admonition is for you.

So how do we take it, considering Terrebonne parish doesn’t have a lot of meat sacrificed to idols on sale in your local Rouses butcher section?

Well first off let me tell you what it doesn’t mean. Paul is not saying you must avoid upsetting and offending people. This is counter to our present culture in which causing offense is a high crime and being one offended is somehow virtuous. But let’s face it, the cross is

scandalous. Speaking Christ crucified means calling sin sin and calling sinners sinners. It's going to upset folks sometimes. St. Paul offended lots of folks. That's not the problem here.

What St. Paul is saying is that we who have knowledge should not behave in ways that make it easy for the weak in faith to slip back into bad spiritual habits. Although we may know where we stand with God, our words and deeds seen by others are a proclamation. What we say and do in our Christian freedom can trip up those who struggle against worldly influences.

Simple example. How many of you casually throw out an "Oh Gawd" and think nothing of it? "Oh Gawd, this donut is delicious!" This is actually a sin against the Second Commandment. But to the weak in faith who hear the "knowing one" speak it, it's also saying it's not all that important to revere God. You can invoke Him for a good donut. Then the one who was growing in fear and love of the Lord is suddenly esteeming Him a bit less.

How many of you have folks in your family who don't attend church regularly? You may bug them about going to church but let me ask you this, what do they hear you saying about church before you leave to go there? After you get back? Are you reflecting joy and thankfulness for the divine gifts you've received? Is your attitude one that would inspire that other person to desire to come next week? Or is it more of your puffed-up criticism about how church should be better or more exciting that inspires them to say, "No thanks".

In our lives in general which gets proclaimed more; our culture's norm of "I have rights!" and "I deserve respect!" or the truth of our baptism "I belong to the Lord. I am a servant of the Most High God"?

You are saved in Christ! And the simple fact that you are sitting in church today in the middle of our unchurched post-church culture is evidence that you have knowledge in the things of God. To anybody in your life who knows you're here, you are the example of a good Christian man or woman! Let that sink in. People look to you to see what it is to be Christ's person.

A lot of these people know of Jesus, maybe were raised in church. A lot of these people know the Gospel of forgiveness of sins at least a little bit. A lot of these folks may have horrible habits and crippling sinful practices when it comes to the faith, but they're holding onto a slim thread of seeking and following Jesus.

St. Paul is saying that your Christian faith isn't all about you. It's about them also. Even it's about them more so! You once were far away from God and helpless to help yourself out of your sin. By God's grace through the Holy Spirit you have been brought close, forgiven, and been made to know the certainty of your salvation in Christ.

That love God has for you is not just for you, but yours to reflect on those less knowing, those weaker, those still struggling to be dwelling firmly in Christ. You have a truth to proclaim to others in how you live your life, and that truth is the Gospel that saves. Be cognizant of what you say and do, always seeking to be building up the weak and immature Christian, the "little ones" Jesus cares for so much.

St. Paul writes, "*Sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*" Your sins are forgiven in Christ. So are your brother's. So are your sister's. This is really, really good news. Seek in all you say and do to be proclaiming this, both for yourself because you know it's true, and for the "little ones" around you who Christ wants to come be steadfast in this knowledge and the salvation such faith secures.

Amen.