

“Fellowship: It’s More Than Food”

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Paul has never been accused of having a simple theology! Ask any seminarian who has struggled through a course on Romans and they will tell you just what they think about the clarity of Paul’s thinking and logic! (Word of warning, any church should think twice before calling a pastor who loves to study Romans!)

Nor would many call Paul a meek and humble servant of the Lord. Even when he is trying to sound humble, he comes off with, shall we say, a bit of an ego.

Listen to what Paul wrote in the opening verses of chapter 9 this is from *The Message*:

And don't tell me that I have no authority to write like this. I'm perfectly free to do this— isn't that obvious? Haven't I been given a job to do? Wasn't I commissioned to this work in a face-to-face meeting with Jesus, our Master? Aren't you yourselves proof of the good work that I've done for the Master? Even if no one else admits the authority of my commission, you can't deny it. Why, my work with you is living proof of my authority!

So, in today’s reading from his letter to the believers in Corinth what is all this talk of Paul's rights as an apostle? Why is he all worked up?

Well, it all has to do with something he wrote earlier in this letter regarding the eating of meat that has been “offered” or prepared in temples where idol worship was held.

And why is this such a big deal?

The church in Corinth was made up of families from all levels of the Corinthian economic/social stratum. Those with the means were accustomed to feasting and they would buy meat in markets connected with the pagan temples of the community.

There were also in the church, ordinary working folks whose incomes and habits allowed for little meat in their diets. To them eating meat “offered to idols” threatened their faith by drawing them back into a culture from which they had just converted to Christianity.

Some have misread this (in my opinion) and used Paul's discussion here as a validation for a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle! This is not Paul's concern. For Paul it is not a matter of meat but of maintaining the fellowship in the Corinthian gathering.

Paul makes the argument that "no idol in the world really exists" and that "there is no God but one." (1 Cor. 8:4) Idols are nothing and of no concern to true believers, so why worry about meat being offered to "nothing."

While Paul's convictions align with those, "in the know" meat eaters, he does not take a side favoring them, rather Paul makes the point that *knowledge without love* "puffs up" while being wise and *knowing love* "builds up." (1 Cor. 8:1)

There has been much talk lately about "freedom." Well, for Paul and in our scriptures *Freedom in Christ is not the right to chose to do as one wishes*. Christian freedom is grounded in love, God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

And in this relationships matter!

Maintaining fellowship matters, matters enough to be as important an element in a conflict resolution process as the facts of the matter do. Paul comes down rather hard on people who justify their insensitive behavior on theological grounds, even though he may agree with their theology!

To this end Paul makes the point that he **will become a vegetarian the rest of his life rather than harm those who would be hurt by his eating meat from idol sacrifice!**

So what Paul is saying about being free respect to all yet making himself slave to all that he might win more of them, goes all the way back to this issue of "to eat or not to eat."

In the first part of chapter 9 (a portion I read for you from *The Message*) Paul asserts his rights as an apostle, a right that includes wages. But then, he renounces the use of these rights. He is making an example of himself of what it means to be truly free of all *and simultaneously a servant to all*. Paul seeks to identify with the "weak" so thoroughly that he renounces privilege and honor, and like the poor in the Corinthian church not only

refuses to eat meat but also supports himself with manual labor. Because he understands this as the way of Jesus.

Again, it is about relationships.

Freedom in Christ is the radical freedom to identify with “others” in their otherness, for Paul this was Jews and Greeks, the strong and the weak. But it should also be noted that the identification with the weak outcast the “other” is consistent with the way of the cross, the gospel of Jesus.

For Paul, his calling as an apostle involves the following of Christ’s sacrificial life for the poor and the weak. This calling is not the unique occupation of the apostles; it is the calling and vocation of *all who are baptized into Christ*.

The church is, therefore, not a community of volunteers, but is itself *a part of the gospel*.

The church a community that God has called into existence to incarnate, to live out and proclaim God's new reality for all of Creation.

This means that in Christ, people can find the radical freedom to identify fully with others, to become as they are, and thus to experience genuine transformation of the self.

This is what Paul means when he writes in today’s passage of his freedom to be a Jew among Jews, to be a Gentile among Gentiles, to be weak among weak, in short, to be all things to all people. (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

So, let me bring this down out of the high theological, conceptual world of Paul to Sunday February 7, 2021 Congregational Church of Laconia, on this Super Bowl Sunday. (Which I understand some call the “Tom Brady Invitational”!)

Three things: *All of which perhaps will carry more weight when we are meeting in person again!* (Which by the way will come! It will!)

1) Fellowship runs deeper than food! Fellowship is about a whole lot more than a potluck or two, or a summer picnic. (As much as I like both!) As Paul says in 1 Cor. 8:8 *Food will not bring us close to God.* (NRSV)

It is about what happens when we gather for food, when we gather for business meetings, when we gather for social events, when we gather for worship or when we volunteer in the community.

When we meet for any of these activities, we are to do it in the spirit of love and unity, identifying with all others in our fellowship and the world, especially, Paul would insist, those who have been weakened by a heavy load of life's problems.

2) The world is watching and **what the world sees in the church is likely to be the first Gospel they come to know.** They say how many will be watching the Super Bowl today? (Just shy of 100 million last years.)

There are billions of people in the world of another faith or no faith, and they are watching us. They know the Christian claims. They've heard the TV preachers. They've seen those portray in movies and by the media.

They've past abuses by missionaries in the name of our faith and have dealt with those "Christian business" people.

But what have they *seen*? What is our example?

How does the good news of Jesus look through us?

3) The third point I make by way of personal illustration. A pet peeve of mine. That dove tails with the last point. (Some might say I've gone from preaching to meddling.)

I am always troubled when I drive into a church parking lot especially on Sunday morning and see one of those signs right next to one of the entrances to the church which says "Parking for (Senior, Associate) Pastor Only."

Several years ago, I attended a leadership conferences lead by John Maxwell, pastor of the Skyline Church in San Diego. As senior pastor of Skyline Church it was his policy that as one rose within the leadership of Skyline church the farther you parked from the church entrance.

Leadership comes with responsibilities not privileges! I appreciate that our sign says, “Parking for Pastor except on Sundays when it is available for handicapped guests.”

It has always been my belief that as leaders of a congregation we need to set the example. Why should I have special privilege? Pastors and church leaders set the simple example by parking out and walk! Leave those parking places for people who really need them. Perhaps even designate those next to the church entrances, as I have seen some churches, with signs which read, “Parking for first time guests”!

What does say to first time guests if they have to circle and circle the church in order to find a parking space? Studies have shown that people will circle maybe twice and then they are off to the restaurant for brunch.

And then to learn later that it is the pastor’s car that is parked right there by the door!

Fellowship, it is about more than food! It even includes parking spaces!