

On Reconciliation and Being Right

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Season of Reconciliation

February 1, 2015

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Texts: Deuteronomy 18.15-20;
Psalm 111;
1 Corinthians 8.1-13;
Mark 1.21-28

I hope Gordon's sermon last week set you up to hear this otherwise strange and irrelevant passage from 1 Corinthians as something to pay attention to. On the surface there isn't much here that connects to 21st century life in western Michigan. As far as I know there isn't much cause to worry about whether our food has been sacrificed to idols before making its way to our plate and even if it was, I'm not aware of anyone's past that might put their conscience in peril.

Obviously it's not the details or the context even that call for our attention but rather the principle here that warrants a second look on our part. At stake is not the issue of food sacrificed to idols. The issue is how we exercise our freedom and knowledge in our relationships with each other. I can actually think of a number of times growing up when questions like this one came up: whether it was ever appropriate to serve alcohol at gatherings of church members or whether it was respectful to wear a hat indoors. One of my favorites was from an East Coast church who would have thought themselves more sophisticated than all of that but who had a knock-down drag-out fight between several elders on a worship committee over the proper attire for serving communion.

These battles over what is proper and what is appropriate and what is sinful were constant conversation points between the Pharisees and Jesus. The middle of the next chapter in Mark contains some of these battles: should Jesus defile himself by eating with sinners and tax collectors, should the disciples fast, should they pick food (a form of work) on the Sabbath. Pharisees believed that their hearts were pure because their hands were

pure. They were rigid in their adherence to the law and chastised Jesus and his disciples for not doing the same. We look at those rules and they seem arbitrary and absurd to us in much the same way that my friends felt about the whole hat wearing deal; in much the same way some of the Christians in Corinth thought about avoiding food sacrificed to idols.

If you look at what is happening in the book of Deuteronomy, you can see where concerns like these come from. There was an original intention in these purity laws to set the Hebrews apart from their neighbors so that they would not be absorbed by them and begin to follow their religious practices. The intention was to keep them from idolatry so that they could be faithful to God and to maintain lives of love for one another. But isn't just idolatry, if you look back a few verses from our text today you can see the law had also to do with avoiding divination, sorcery, consulting mediums, trying to contact the dead. All of those practices have to do with trying to understand the will of God. The Hebrews at that time had Moses who shared with them what God wanted but they were worried what would happen when Moses is gone. The promise is that God would provide another prophet who would proclaim the Word of God to them.

So the practice in Judaism over the years was to gather in synagogues to hear the Word of God through the law passed down from Moses and from the prophets. There were scribes who lovingly maintained these scrolls and knew well the writings of the Scriptures; there were Pharisees who were experts in the law; rabbis who interpreted these teachings. Into this beautiful tradition, Jesus shows up at the synagogue in Capernaum and begins to teach. When the people hear him they sense that he has a power in him that sets him apart from other Rabbis, Pharisees and Scribes. You can understand why they were so amazed when he cast out that evil spirit or later when he heals a paralytic, but it actually tells us that first they were astounded simply by his teaching. So what was it about his teaching that was so different?

Mark's gospel more than the others gives us a sense of how unsettling Jesus' teaching was to those who heard it. The gospels written later have a lot more explanation in them. John has these long theological reflections (just think of his first chapter). Matthew contains lengthier segments of

Jesus' teaching (just think of the Sermon on the Mount). In Mark you get the sense, as one pastor put it, that "Jesus didn't just teach in parables but he himself was a parable from God, an enigma wrapped in a mystery."¹ When you listen to Jesus, he doesn't hand out a set of rules to follow like the Pharisees did as if you could check off the things you do and don't do and then you're done with it. Jesus understood that the goal of the law and the prophets was to help us love God and love neighbor and sometimes figuring out what that means in the complicated stuff of life is messy.

When we are sure that we know everything and that people who disagree with us are not only wrong but stupid that's probably the best clue that we've fallen off track. This is the real concern, I think, for Paul that people were becoming arrogant in their knowledge and dismissive of people who still had questions or saw something from a different point of view. One of the settings I see this happen all the time is when pastors and elders get together as a Classis or at the national gathering of the General Synod. In those settings we are often considering really complicated questions. It is easy to speak with arrogance and it's amazing how quickly we can let our passion and conviction lead us to belittle those with whom we disagree or to make accusations even regarding the motives of others whom we have very little personal relationship. This is what Paul is warning against – the way in which knowledge can puff up rather than letting love build up.

But there's something more here than a simple exhortation to behave when we disagree, although stopping there wouldn't be a bad place to stop! Paul provides a theological ground for his exhortation to behave when we disagree. It comes in vs. 6 "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." I remember preaching on Colossians 1.17 a year or so ago when a similar phrase from that letter jumped off the page at me "in Christ *all things* hold together." Almost every letter contains this claim that all things come from God and are held together in Christ. If that is true then every division among us will be reconciled.

¹ This is a quote from someone but I can no longer find who or where.

I named some points of division earlier with rather low stakes. Paul intends for us to stand on this truth of the fundamental unity of the universe even as we wrestle with the most vexing divisions that are tearing us apart. I do not know how we will ever live into the kind of unity envisioned here. All I know is that is where we are heading and that means we must give ourselves to the long and hard slog that reconciliation can sometimes feel like. Being convinced that we are right does not get us off that hook.

In fact, being convinced that we are right and have nothing to learn may very well be the first sign that we need to take a step back and sit again at the feet of the mysterious rabbi, Jesus Christ. What we learn at his feet should cause us to wonder, maybe even to scratch our heads in befuddlement, certainly to raise more questions than definitive answers. The movement Jesus is looking for is not from knowledge to more knowledge....the movement God wants in our lives is from knowledge to love. The more you love God, the more you love neighbor, the more you understand that life and faith are mystery....you can't reduce it to set of rules and you can't ever claim that you have it all figured out. As one paraphrase of this passage puts it: "Sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all."²

² From *The Message* by Eugene Peterson