

“On Knowing Just Enough to Be Dangerous”
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
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Our passage tonight from 1 Corinthians is but one of several sections of the letter which begin, “Now concerning such and so...” on matters ranging from sex and marriage to spiritual gifts. Recognizing his great wisdom and connection with Christ, members of the church at Corinth had clearly requested Paul’s assistance on matters which were confusing to them, and in our particular case, he is responding to questions about what to do with the troublesome issue of eating meat which may have been part of a ceremony of a non-Christian religion. Certain of the Corinthians, and probably those who had asked Paul’s advice, were of the mind that since they knew that there really were no other gods besides the one God, and all else was therefore superstition, that they could safely eat any meat and not worry about inadvertently participating in a forbidden practice that could be labeled idolatrous. No god, no idol worship, no problem.

There were others in the Corinthian church who must have lived in dread fear that the meat they might buy in the marketplace, or the meat they might eat at a friend’s home, was idolatrous meat, and that by eating it they needed to feel shame and guilt. Paul says that their consciences were defiled. Presumably this would lead them to stray from the Christian way and resume idol worship, since, hey, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Life was hard enough as a Christian without

worrying about where you could or couldn't shop or about from whom you could accept a dinner invitation. If I'm going to feel this bad, I might as well give it up! The issue then was whether those with the knowledge of the truth about other gods should exercise the freedom of that knowledge in full view of those whose knowledge was not as comprehensive and who would be slowed or stopped in their faith by the seemingly hypocritical behavior of their brothers and sisters in the faith. What are we supposed to think when those we look to are doing what we feel is wrong? One might imagine as well how this would play among potential converts, what with these tensions among the faithful. And so, Paul is called upon to advise those who likely think that the more immature in the faith should just get over it.

But Paul is too tricky to be caught in the trap of deciding this one on the basis of "knowledge." Instead, he reframes the issue as a matter of love, since, as he says, "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The issue is not who has better knowledge, but about how love will be lived out in the community of the faithful. Using knowledge as a basis for decision making, Paul seems to be saying, leaves you without an adequate moral framework. Using love as the basis for decision-making, means that knowledge is now subjected to a higher authority. At issue here is whether the freedom, and indeed the power, that come with knowledge will be used or abused, limited or limitless, edifying or destroying. In the end, he chooses to err on the side of abstaining from that which might cause others to

stumble, out of love, even though he too possesses a knowledge that would allow him to eat without reservation.

Paul's words of caution to his more enlightened followers seem to echo Jesus' words to his disciples, when he said, "To whom much has been given, much is expected." You have this great freedom and power, but with that freedom and power comes an immense burden of responsibility, even if only in the realm of example to those who are not yet as mature in their faith. For those who possess much, who possess knowledge, it may well be that what is expected is restraint, a witness that freedom and power used without discretion are no freedom and power at all. The concern in the Corinthian church may well present itself as a question concerning meat sacrificed to idols, but that is only symptomatic of the real issue which underlies it, namely, the proper use of freedom in Christ and the power which comes with responsibility.

Now, that is all a very nice little theory, and there is not much sacrificed meat for sale in the meat market, so what does this look like in practice these days? Well, perhaps some of you also attend church in local Costa Rican congregations where the drinking of alcohol is still pretty taboo, at least drinking it publicly. Enlightened Christian that you are, *you* know that the occasional glass of wine is not going to turn you into an alcoholic. You know that you have the self-control to stop drinking before becoming intoxicated. You have the knowledge that it is not what goes into a person that defiles, but what comes out. And so you are invited to

lunch at a place that serves beer, and it is hot, and you are thirsty, and your meal will be oh so much tastier washed down by a cold one. And the waiter is at your side taking beverage orders, and you are faced with a decision. What will you do? Will you exercise your knowledge that drinking is not fatal to life or faith? Or will you exercise your restraint to show your love for others whose life or faith might be affected negatively by the witness of a nice, cold Imperial taking the edge off your thirst? You see, those around the table may be those who have come to the church as recovering alcoholics, and may not see much difference between the church and the street, and may, in their weakened consciences, decide once again for the street. May I take your order please?

It seems to me that another good test case might be the biggest test case, that of the monumental decision to go to war. And it seems that Paul's wisdom may be appropriately, if retroactively, applied to the situation faced by the United States and other nations about going into Iraq in 2003, though it could also be applied more recently to the Israeli decision to lay siege to Gaza, or the Russian decision to invade Georgia. Leaving aside questions of whether or not Saddam Hussein posed a real threat to us or his neighbors, and leaving aside whether or not he was the devil incarnate, what should concern, and what should have concerned, Christians is the basis on which any decision about military intervention is made. And in such case, will it be made on the basis of knowledge, which puffs up, or on the basis of love which builds up? Let me put it more pointedly like this: Presented with even

a perfectly justifiable rationale for war, should we attack because we *can* attack? Or should we refrain from attacking for the sake of others, even if it means sacrificing something of our own liberty, in that Iraq case, what seemed to many as a quick and clear resolution to a nagging international problem? Looking back, the proposal to attack Iraq unilaterally and preemptively seems to me to have been a decision based on what some of the Corinthians valued as knowledge; we had the intelligence, we had the overwhelming force, we had at least some measure of moral authority. To this way of thinking, those who believed in a non-violent or less expeditious solution were those with weak consciences, dangerous and delusional, lacking the clarity to see the false gods of humility and diplomacy for what they are. On the other hand, the proposal to seek other solutions, whether they were continuing inspections or allowing the UN to determine a course of action or any number of other suggestions, seems to me to have been a proposal based on what Paul calls love, for it recognized that actions have *both* intended and unintended consequences. If that sounds simplistic, so be it. But when we consider not only the results of the decision to wage war, but also the example and precedent set by it, as one which will affect not only ourselves, but our children and grandchildren, it may not be simplistic enough.

Christians have often been accused of being naive. We have often been ridiculed as utopian when we suggest that the way the world “is” is not the way the world must be. We battle daily to remember that power and prestige and wealth

and high fashion are the false gods who would have us follow them. We are asked, “How can you believe in a God in a world as twisted as this one? It’s just so unrealistic to believe in God. Look around you.” But friends I daresay that we are far greater realists than we have been given credit for, because we know that violence begets violence. We know that love builds up, we know that Christ died for all, we know that we are bound up with our fellow human beings in such a way that if any one of us suffers, all suffer. We know that we are people to whom much has been given and from whom much is expected. We know that our own Lord and Savior Jesus Christ restrained himself from violence when it was easily justified. And from all this we know that a decision for violence is a decision which says that my freedom to do something to you is more important than your very life and more important than my own soul. Just ask those smashing windows and grabbing purses. Sobering stuff indeed.

Now, for those of you who, despite having the knowledge that missing church tonight to watch the Super Bowl will not irreparably harm your faith, decided to show your love and exercise restraint and miss all the great new commercials, your reward is here, in the form of a story almost as entertaining as the ads. Around the time immediately preceding the start of the Iraq war, making its way around the world through forwarded emails was a grassroots campaign in support of an alternative to war in Iraq using a simple, but potentially powerful method. Perhaps some of you received it. The idea was to put 1/2 cup uncooked

rice in a small plastic bag and wrap it in a piece of paper on which you had written the words: “ ‘If your enemies are hungry, feed them.’ - Romans 12:20. Please send this rice to the people of Iraq; do not attack them.” Then you mailed it to the White House. Now, clearly, this effort was not as successful as its proponents might have hoped, and in fact, it failed miserably. Nevertheless, before you dismiss this idea as simply naive, remember that those who proposed it were aware of what happened the first time a group of people who know that “love builds up” filled some baggies with rice. In the mid-1950s, the peace organization Fellowship of Reconciliation, learning of famine in the Chinese mainland, launched a “Feed Thine Enemy” campaign. Members and friends mailed thousands of little bags of rice to the White House with a tag quoting the Bible, “If thine enemy hunger, feed him.” As far as anyone knew for more than ten years, the campaign was an abject failure. The President did not acknowledge receipt of the bags publicly; certainly, no rice was ever sent to China. What nonviolent activists only learned a decade later was that the campaign played a significant, perhaps even determining role in preventing nuclear war. Twice while the campaign was on, President Eisenhower met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider U.S. options in the conflict with China over two contested islands. The generals twice recommended the use of nuclear weapons. President Eisenhower each time turned to his aide and asked how many little bags of rice had come in. When told they numbered in the tens of thousands, Eisenhower told the generals that as long as so many Americans were expressing

active interest in having the U.S. feed the Chinese, he certainly wasn't going to consider using nuclear weapons against them.

Friends, it was not logic that convinced Eisenhower to refrain from pushing the button and it was not logic that convinced Paul to refrain from eating meat. We know what it was. It was the love of Jesus Christ in the hearts of faithful people who used their freedom responsibly and creatively, and by doing so built others up. As we seek divine wisdom on the decisions we inevitably face, let us seek it with hearts that are prepared to consider, as Paul did, the proper basis on which to make them. Amen.