

January 29

Choose to Love

I Corinthians 8:1-13

As I began to think about this passage I had this question, "How does one bring out the contemporary relevance of an ancient debate over whether to eat food offered to idols?" For many people in the US, the primary questions raised about meat are "Do I want chicken, beef, or pork tonight?" "Is this beef grass-fed or grain-fed?" "Do I want regular bacon, low-sodium bacon, or turkey bacon?" Or, there is the contemporary continuum along the lines of vegan, vegetarian, lacto-ovo vegetarian, to those omnivores who eat and enjoy anything, including Spam, potted meat, and haggis. People at various points on that continuum engage in debates that typically start along ethical or environmental lines and might get to theological considerations of whether meat is right or wrong to eat. That is not the arena of Paul's debate.

Paul focuses on how we might gauge the impact of our actions on the lives of others. Even more he is talking about how we might restrict our own behavior because of an awareness of how our actions might affect others. A closer parallel to our own day would be debates over "political correctness," for example, whether to use gendered language for God or the people of God in worship. No one debates whether the words "father," "mother," "he," or "she" are, in themselves, good or bad. They're just words. But in various contexts, those words take on additional layers of meaning. Paul is saying in this text that we should use any of them only as we are aware of the good or harm they might do to others.

For some this might sound suspiciously like situational ethics or simply giving in to political correctness and I understand how these ideas, especially in this politically charged year of presidential politics, drives us nuts. To see this only as a call to be politically correct in your speech and perhaps actions would cause many of you to quit listening about now. But there exists an underlying ethic that skewers any pretensions held by anyone on either side of a political correctness debate.

Paul doesn't attack either side of the debate that was raging about whether to eat meat. He attacks both sides and I am sure would continue to do this today on most of

our debatable issues. He attacks everyone, regardless of which side of a debate they stand on, who focuses on showing that "I'm right. You're wrong. And, it's stupid of you to think and act the way you do."

Today, I believe Paul would go after both sides of liturgical wars, worship wars, talk radio hosts, even up to ideologically deadlocked members of Congress and say, "Tape this up on your mirror so that every time you see yourself you also see these words: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.'" Anyone who can only see "how right I am" and does not pause to consider the intrinsic value and worth of those who think and act differently misunderstands the heart of the gospel. Paul says, "If you have to choose between being loving and being right, be loving. If you see someone wavering on the brink of their faith in God, think about what you can do for that person on their terms, not on your terms." Paul calls us to humility before God and our fellow human beings, to an awareness of the immensity of our own ignorance and the enormous extent of our own capacity to fall into error.

Paul says that, objectively speaking in the eyes of God, people who oppose eating meat offered to idols are wrong. Nonetheless, people stand at different points in their understanding and in the strength of their relationship to God. So, for their sake and out of respect for their relationship to God, I'll act as if they're right. This wasn't a forever decision it was more of a, I will do this at least for now and in this case. It was a step on a journey in Paul's life of faith and in acknowledgement that others are on similar and different walks of faith as well. He takes this approach not out of condescension or self-righteousness but out of his recognition that on a scale of one to a hundred, when we compare our understanding and love to the understanding and love of God, we all stand, at best, at, maybe a two, or on our best days, a five.

So what do we do with this information? I see it saying three things. The first of these is that being right isn't always the most important thing. We place too much emphasis on being right. With this emphasis we now often feel that it is somehow wrong to compromise. Compromise has become a dirty word. We see this clearly in politics but it is true in so many other areas. People get fixed on the rightness of their views on religion, the environment, on child raising and on and on the list. From this position they

will not listen to other opinions, they challenge any view that is different from their own, often with devastating results for relationships.

I am reminded of a somewhat humorous story from some years back. A couple had been married for just over a year. They came to a marriage counselor because she wanted a divorce. She informed the counselor that she could not live with such a slob. What was he doing that was so horrible to cause her to want out? He was squeezing the toothpaste tube from the middle instead of the end and on occasion did not get the cap screwed back on firmly causing the toothpaste to dry out a bit. They had talked and argued. She knew she was right and the only reason he did not do it her way, the only way and the best way, was because he was a slob, didn't care about her feelings and didn't really love her! He responded that he couldn't see what the big deal was. He tried to squeeze the tube correctly and put the lid on tightly but occasionally he was busy and forgot. He did it right most of the time but she wouldn't grant him that. He loved her and cared about her. The counselor, stifling a smile, suggested they buy two tubes of toothpaste, one for each and he put his where she would not see it, in a drawer, and she was not to look. That suggestion saved the marriage. This is a funny example of the deadly serious problem of needing to be right and forcing others to do it our way or else. This was what was happening in the church when Paul wrote these words and it is still going on today.

Paul reminds us that we have a responsibility to others, especially when it comes to faith. It isn't all about you and your wants and desires. Even if you know you are right on an issue Paul reminds us that we must have compassion for others. When we say and do things that hurt others, we are wrong. Even if we believe that what they are doing is wrong we still have an obligation to care about them. This is not Paul calling on us to be a doormat with a sign that says, "Walk on me." We can have values and views and we can stand up for what we believe. When we begin to force them on others with a "I am right and if you do not believe this way you are wrong" that we get into trouble. You can hold firm beliefs but always grant others a different opinion and acknowledge that it might have validity too. And when someone pushes at you their views with an "I am right you are wrong," instead of responding in kind you can say politely, I respect

your opinion but I disagree with you. And if they come back at you, keep repeating the phrase. You can stand your ground.

Paul reminds us that we need to see all as our family. Think about it. You would not purposefully hurt your children or grandchildren by your words or actions. Often you come to some agreement to not to talk about certain subjects. You know each other's opinions and you choose to disagree but not argue about it. I grew up in a family of preachers. Besides my father and brother who were/are United Methodist ministers I also had an uncle who was a congregational minister. He had made the decision to leave the Methodist church many years before over the way ministers are assigned. He was adamant about why our system was wrong and the call system was best. I remember one summer when we were all at my grandmother's Uncle Fred began to warm up to this subject. He was about to go into a rant when my grandmother, who was usually a very mild agreeable woman who got along with everyone, rapped the table with her spoon, gave her son a look only a mother could give and said, "Freddie", I had never heard him called that, "we are not talking about this. If you continue you may leave the table." She was talking to a 40 something man as you would a boy. I wondered what my uncle would do as he had a bit of a volatile personality. My grandfather could hardly contain a smirk. Uncle Fred looked down at his place and said, "I'm sorry mother." I never heard another word about appointment verses call that visit.

If we can do this in our family Paul says all deserve this consideration. Remember that Paul in essence says, "If you have to choose between being loving and being right, be loving" This is our challenge to this day. It is hard especially when some take your unwillingness to challenge as a sign of weakness but I, like Paul will still continue to choose love.