



# “A Heart Undivided”

a sermon by

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Our text comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 8:1-13. It was written about 20 years after Christ's death, as the community is struggling to understand what it really means to 'be' community together as converted Jews and Gentiles each coming to the Christian table from very different practices and social groups.

The struggle in the Corinthian church socially and theologically played itself out in very practical ways such as in the question of what food is or is not to be eaten. It is a conversation about food that Paul takes on here, but he is offering also a reflection about behavior in the whole of the Christian life.

"Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth- as in fact 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. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."

Before you start second guessing your decision to come to Wednesday Worship today because our text seems so obscure let me say again that this passage is not about food, it is about life.

Ok, it is technically about food and I am sure that my former colleague Jim Miller who loved to tease me mercilessly about my being vegetarian would have a field day with this one- but fortunately he's not here. He's up in the Michigan north woods killing things.

Here the young church in Corinth was squabbling about something of a technicality of the faith- flowing like a tributary out of the heart of the gospel but that nonetheless gained enough stature in the minds of the people that it threatened the union of the whole body. Do we or do we not eat meat sacrificed to idols?

It was a good question, actually. Idol worship was rampant in this notoriously fashionable town known for having lots of wealth and little culture. It was between two port cities, so the population was pretty transient- hence this issue with the culture- and the people came from everywhere. Excavation of the city has revealed some two dozen major altars and shrines to various gods from the Eastern Mediterranean and Rome.

At the time, if you worshipped a particular idol and ate meat offered in sacrifice to that idol- it was said to defile you. But, if you were a Christian, then you knew that there really were no

idols of other gods because in fact there was only one God, and so it didn't much matter in what name the animal was sacrificed - because of the freedom from concern over all that that you gained in Christ, you could dine with a clear conscience- bon appetite!

But then there was the issue of the onlookers. Because of the diversity in the church, there were still some people who believed that you just shouldn't eat meat sacrificed to animals because it still had some power and simply wasn't right.

Well, if in your freedom you ate the meat in question, and another person, perceiving that you were smarter than they were or perhaps more faithful decided to follow suit, then you have caused them inadvertently to sin against their conscience. Or, if someone in town saw you eat said meat and knew you were a Christian, then perhaps they would think you were honoring another god or defaming their own- also causing them injury.

It was essentially a no-win situation and to this Paul says, "Enough!" "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." And then the lynchpin phrase, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Yes the Corinthians, among dozens of other things, were fighting about food. But at its core their argument was about something far more significant. At their core they were essentially asking, "how in the world do we live together when we are all just so different?"

Different people, different values, different backgrounds, different ways of reading scripture, all absolutely certain that we each have a pretty good handle on the truth- the right thing to do- the right interpretation of the gospel- the right way to worship- the right way to serve- the right way to live...all these people- called to be one body. How do you do it?

Some 2,000 years later and the church is still struggling to answer this question. Maybe even we all are weather you are reflecting on why there is no peace in the Middle East, or in the middle of your own living room. How do we, all different people with all different ideas and circumstances, come to live as one body together?

You won't like Paul's answer. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," he says. Paul holds up a mirror and challenges us to look inside and really see what is staring back. Not just once in a moment of clarity, but in every single situation of every moment of our lives, he wants us to ask ourselves what it is that we are truly reflecting to the world- is it us? Or is it Christ in us?

Because how we answer that question will reflect not only on the state of our spiritual lives but on the state of the union of this body that we are called to together as well.

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In the vastness of our human insecurity and need we crave what Paul calls knowledge- certainty about the way things are and how they are to work so that we can have some say in how it is going to be.

And when we stumble upon a portion of truth uncovered by our pursuit of knowledge it is only human that we should rush to stake our claim and so it was with the Corinthians each with their own certainty about the proper response to a simple piece of meat.

And they were all right. But at what cost? In their energy to defend the right way of doing things based on their God-given knowledge, they were tearing down the body of Christ. So Paul raises up the mirror and asks, who is really speaking here? And who is this fight really for?

We need difference to remind us that God's ways are not our ways lest the certainty of our convictions crowd out the reminder that we are all in need of grace. And if God is love as the apostle John suggests, and love does not insist on its own way as Paul would later write, then is it not more important to be loving than right?

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up, he says. Knowledge won't lead us to salvation. Only Christ. And it is him who binds us together in love.

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So perhaps the better question to be asked by those of us who are wondering just how in the world we are to be a single unified community comprised of believers of an infinite variety is: are we reacting to one another out of our need to defend our knowledge, or are we really responding to each other in love?

For as much as it pains me to say it because I'm afraid of what I might see too, in any given situation the capacity for healing and potential for wholeness in the body, to say nothing of what the world perceives of us, will have much to do with how we answer the question that is raised when we dare to look in the mirror. Is it us, or Christ in us looking back? And yes, if it is the latter it will most likely feel like a sacrifice. There is a vocabulary for all of this- I just returned from a Centering Prayer retreat and there they call it the tension of the false self- all of our ego, our defenses, our systems of control- the superficial 'us', which we try and unpack and uproot to get at the true self- God in us.

And within the Christian contemplative tradition there are many ways of speaking of it so there is a vocabulary for this that Paul is himself conversant with. And there are also things to do if you hold up that mirror and don't really like what you see - prayer and perhaps a little stillness with God being a good start.

It is a constant process of refinement that we are called to and that will surely take a lifetime before it is complete. A daily act of, as Paul says, being crucified with Christ so that it is no longer I who live but Christ in me.

But it is this process under the inspiration and supervision of our Lord that has kept the body of Christ alive and well for centuries. Unified even when there is not consensus. And I have to believe there is something to it if we are to have a future as a body let alone fulfillment and fullness as disciples of Jesus Christ and family members and colleagues and friends.

Our heart gets pulled in so many different directions from forces outside ourselves that it can tear us apart within. But if we can get clear on Christ and have a heart that is undivided and for him such that it is willing to be his own heart- then we can be incarnations of God's divine love to the world. And that, my friends, changes things. Amen.