

**Epiphany 4B**  
**Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church**  
**Lakeland, FL**  
**January 31, 2021**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**  
**Psalms 111**  
**1 Corinthians 8:1-13**  
**Mark 1:21-28**

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Last Thursday at our Evening Prayer we reflected a bit on the epistle reading for today – I Corinthians 8. We’re going to spend a bit more time on this reading today. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Christians to whom Paul was writing were among the diverse population of Corinth, a population of Jews and Greeks and Gentiles and Romans and a smattering of other peoples as well. Corinth was a Roman colony perhaps 50 miles west of Athens. It was a cosmopolitan city with two major ports. The cultic religion of Rome was predominant. And into this the Christian church was growing, a church that reflected the diversity of the city in which it existed. Unlike Israel where poverty was the condition of most, Corinth – and the church in Corinth – consisted of very wealthy and affluent, very poor and disadvantaged and some in the middle. This diversity led to cliques and factions and disagreements and discord. These conflicts were reported to Paul by Chloe who was one of the leaders of the house churches typical in Corinth. This prompted Paul’s letter to the church, a letter in which he contrasted the logical with the ethical.

Among the problems the church was facing was controversy about what to eat for dinner. You see, part of the predominant religion in Corinth involved making sacrifices to pagan gods. And the issue was whether it was appropriate for Christians to buy and eat such meat for their family meals and social events. One commentator put it this way: the faction of well-educated, well-to-do, rather sophisticated members of the church believed that there was nothing improper about such meat-eating. They had knowledge – they knew – that these idols were false and have no power. And so in their gatherings, their banquets, their parties and home entertainment, even those gatherings of fellow believers, meat offered to idols would be served. Logically, eating such meat would have no effect on one’s life or faith.

Contrast this then with those who felt that eating such meat was not in keeping with their newfound Christian faith. Those who didn’t see it as a simple understanding that eating this meat was benign because the gods to whom it was offered were false gods. Those for whom eating such meat bordered on being a form of idol worship. For these, who may not have subscribed to the more sophisticated understanding of the logical implications, it was a matter of faith. They did not want to be drawn back anywhere near to the idolatrous culture from which they had been converted to the Christian faith. And so it was, that discord resulted – each holding to their position, positions diametrically opposed one to the other. How could this be resolved? What standard should be used? What to do?

Paul recognizes that eating this meat is not prohibited in the young church. He says – we are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. Here are two factions then, each within their “rights.” Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

Liberty – freedom – rights. What does this mean? Having this liberty – that is, the freedom to eat meat offered to idols – means that one has the right to act in a certain way. Yet, Paul says this: Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the others. Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

Freedom and liberty are important values to us today. They have important civic meaning. They are almost a shorthand for what it means to live in the United States. We have laws protecting our freedoms. Our constitution is amended by a Bill of Rights. The Liberty Bell is a beloved national shrine. But you see, our country is not the Church.

Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. As Christians we are called to a different understanding of freedom. Brother Martin Luther says that a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. And a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all and subject to none – that is, no one can impose any burden upon me to assure God’s love for me. No one can impede God’s abundant grace to me. I owe nothing to anyone in terms of the life that Jesus has claimed for me, made for me, and into which I have been drawn. No one. And a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. I am not my own. I live not for my own purposes, my own goals, my own desires, my own rights. As a follower of Christ, we each are called to serve, to walk in the way of love, as the Episcopal Presiding Bishop Curry puts it. Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

And so that brings us around to a central question, one that was asked in the Gospel reading today – and one that is grappled with throughout Jesus’ ministry – and even beyond. Who has authority over whom? The Pharisees, the keepers of the law, attempted to assert their authority over Jesus and his band of disciples chastising them when they broke the rules to heal on the Sabbath, to harvest on the Sabbath, to eat even with the unclean and discarded. Even among the disciples there were some who wanted authority over others – James and John, sons of Zebedee, wanted positions of power and authority and influence in Jesus’ kingdom. But Jesus said that whoever would be great among you must become your servant. The ministry of Jesus was a servant-ministry. And we each and we together are called to the same.

Of course, we do not have disputes today over meat offered to idols. But perhaps we might consider what some of our idols are today, where are our deepest conflicts. As I look at my life and as I look around, I see individualism and independence worshiped. Perhaps, interdependence and the common good is more true. I see consumerism and accumulation of wealth ardently sought after. Perhaps, gratitude and contentment are more true. I see bravado and bombast applauded and cheered. Perhaps, clarity and kindness are more true. I see our propensity to cast things as black or white. Perhaps a palette of color is more true.

Knowledge puffs up. But, my friends, we are called to love because love builds up. Now, I will be the first to say that this is not always easy. That’s why we need God and we need each other. We need to remember that in the waters of our baptisms, God called us “Beloved!” We were marked with the sign of the cross of Christ forever! We come together -- not physically out of love for each other – yet together in spirit and prayer and phone calls and notes. None of us are alone. Always remember and never forget – none of us are alone. We are held in the arms of God, led by the Holy Spirit with Jesus at our side.

Thanks be to God!