

## THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Epiphany 4 Year B

Dt. 18:15-20; Ps. 111; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; Mk. 1:21-28

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No doubt, you have all heard the old proverb: “Knowledge is power.” Ethel Mumford, American novelist said: “Knowledge is power if you know it about the right person.”

And then, of course, there is the old Arabian Proverb. See if you can follow it:

He who knows and knows he knows—

He is wise—follow him.

He who knows and knows not he knows—

He is asleep—wake him.

He who knows not and knows not he knows not—

He is a fool—shun him.

He who knows not and knows he knows not—

He is a child—teach him.

In the ancient city of Delphi there sat a certain woman known as the Oracle of Delphi. People who were anxious to know the future, or the outcome of some business transaction, would come to her with their questions and she would give them answers. She also had a number of prophets with her, whose task it was to interpret her suitably vague prophesies for those who came seeking knowledge. One day a man came and asked the Oracle: “Who is the wisest person in the world?” She answered, “Socrates.” Now, Socrates on hearing what she had said didn’t believe her. But after listening to many people proudly sprouting to him of their (to them) great knowledge, Socrates finally realised that the Oracle was indeed correct. He *was* the wisest person in the world, for it was Socrates who said of himself: “As for me, all I know is that I know nothing.” True wisdom for the philosopher was being able to admit that you didn’t know everything.

Many of those in the Corinthian church prided themselves in their knowledge. Knowledge of the gospel truths, meant, for them, freedom to participate in pagan cultic feasts which were so much a part of the social lifestyle in Corinth. After all, there was only one God...and this God had declared all foods clean. So why not? But some of the “weaker” Christians in the Corinthian church would *not* join in. They were bound by superstition and legalism. So, they decided that what they would do is write a letter to the apostle Paul and get him to set these weaker Christians straight. We know (they said to themselves) that Paul will tell them it’s OK.

Unfortunately, what these “so-called” knowledgeable people did not realise was that although their arguments were essentially correct—that there *is* only one God and that all foods *are* essentially clean—the basis for their line of argument was nevertheless, flawed. So, what we have here in this text, is Paul’s answer to their question regarding food that is sacrificed to idols, which, of course, was normally found within the context of pagan worship—and that’s the crux of the matter.

We, in the church, often think we know a lot. We can even pride ourselves in our knowledge. But how much do we really know? And how much of what we think we know do we truly know? And how much of what we truly know do we actually put into practice? We know about the grace of God, yet we often live out our faith with rigid legalism. We know that Christ teaches us to love our enemies, yet how many of us have trouble even loving our friends—let alone our enemies. We know that there is one God in heaven, but in our practice we often worship ourselves and many of the things the world has to offer?

After 12 years of formal academic study, obtaining a Licentiate in Theology and three theological degrees, and after 25 years of ministry, I have come to realise that the more I learn, the more I realise just how much I don't know. My experience has also been that those who think they have it all together, knowledge-wise, have usually been the ones who have studied and researched the least. They tend to only read the books that they agree with—or visa-versa. It seems to me that the less you know, the more dogmatic you become.

So how, then, does Paul tackle this very sensitive issue of Christian freedom—in the light of knowledge? What does he tell us about the nature of true knowledge that's grounded in the gospel of Christ? And finally, how does this question of “food sacrificed to idols” relate to us today.

Paul, as he addresses this situation here, does not give a straight forward answer—as much as we would like him to. He realises that behind their reasoning (that is, in regard to food sacrificed to idols) is this issue about “knowledge”—and it's *that* issue that he addresses here.

While the Corinthians stressed that true knowledge gave them the authority to eat this food, Paul however, stresses that knowledge is not the basis for Christian conduct (1-3). That privilege is given over to something that the Corinthian church did not seem to know too much about—the overriding principle of “love.” He states, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Knowledge may expand the brain but love expands the heart and ministers to the needs of others. You can never convince a person to convert to the Christian faith with knowledge—only through love. As Paul says elsewhere, “They shall know you are Christians by your love.” It was love and not knowledge that characterised the Christian church in its early days.

Knowledge, therefore, is like fire—while it can be a great servant, it is nevertheless a cruel master. Knowledge without love becomes tyranny. Knowledge without love leads to legalism and spiritual bondage. True knowledge, as Paul points out, is exercised in love toward others. True knowledge does not consist of the accumulation of data, or even the correctness of one's theology, but in the fact that one has learned to live in love toward others.

And while it's true that knowledge or insight often leads to freedom, it's also true that it often results, finally, in the demand for “freedom” in the form of what we refer to as “rights.” How often do you hear people talking about their “rights”? True knowledge is

never an end in itself—it is only a means to a greater end—the building up of others. Freedom, then, does not end in the exercising of one’s rights, but in love for one another. So, while the Corinthians plead their cause on the basis of knowledge, Paul points out that on that basis, their knowledge is incomplete, for they have misunderstood the true nature of Christian freedom and, as a consequence, they have misunderstood the true meaning of the gospel.

Christian ethics, then, for us, as it was for those in the Corinthian church, is not grounded in our knowledge—rather, as Paul goes on to point out, Christian ethics is grounded in the unity of God and the work of Christ (4-6)

Paul has heard their arguments, and by and large, he doesn’t disagree with their propositions. It *is* true that the pagan gods do not exist in any form of objective reality. I am reminded of Elisha on Mount Carmel... The purpose of the exercise was not to prove that his God was more powerful than Baal, but that Baal did not in fact exist.

However, Paul does go on to point out that in the minds of the worshippers of these gods, there is a subjective reality. That is; that although these gods do not exist in the way that the worshippers believe them to exist, they nevertheless have an existence in the context of worship. Later on in this letter, Paul makes it clear, that to fellowship in this context is to fellowship with demons.

So, what the Corinthians have not considered, is that to worship such “gods” is not to worship nothing, but to worship demons. Pagan worship *does* have a reality and some in the Corinthian community will be affected by that reality if they participate in eating food sacrificed to idols.

Paul points out the grounding of his position. His declaration that there is only “one God” and “one Lord” stands in sharp contrast to the “many gods” and “many lords” of the pagans. In this way, he points to the uniqueness of the only God. The Christian God stands apart from pagan Gods as being Father and the creator of all. God the Father is both the ultimate source and the ultimate destiny of all things, including ourselves. The Lord Jesus Christ is the One through whom God created all things and redeemed us. Therefore, it is through him that we now exist for God.

Now, because worship involves a relationship between the worshipper and the thing worshipped, participation in pagan worship, which is what eating food is sacrificed to idols is all about, means that the Corinthians were involving themselves in a relationship with demons. It follows then, that since they, as Christians, have a relationship with God through Christ, to participate in pagan worship means that their relationship with God will be affected. This is the bottom line. So it is true for us, when we participate in anything that conveys an allegiance to anything other than God, in Christ.

In the light of this, then, freedom, which comes from knowledge, entails a certain responsibility—a responsibility to others.

Christian freedom, no matter how informed with knowledge it might be, should never be the means of another's falling. For the Corinthians to return to their former practices of worship would mean to once again eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. The final result would be defilement, because for them, it would be to return to idolatry and hence it would be a defilement of their new relationship with Christ. For us then, to return to our old way of living, before we accepted the grace of God, would be to defile our relationship with Christ. It would be just like a member of AA, taking a drink because "what harm could one drink be". I think we all know the answer to that.

Therefore freedom cannot be insisted on in terms of "rights." Freedom necessitates responsibility for others in the church. For the Corinthians, freedom became the ultimate goal. Knowledge gave freedom and freedom should be exercised at all costs. For Paul, however, the opposite was the case. Love meant freely giving up ones rights for the sake of others.

And there is more at stake. Paul's concern was that, for the sake of freedom, informed by their so-called knowledge, the spiritual life of another Christian may be compromised to the extent of that person possibly falling away completely.

So, not only is knowledge an improper basis for Christian ethics but the Corinthian's knowledge of idolatry was so defective that they failed to understand its true implications. In their reliance of knowledge for their conduct and in the exercising of their "rights", the Corinthians were responsible for the possible destruction of a Christian brother or sister. The offence that was given by the actions of the Corinthians, was not that another Christian may be offended by their actions but that they might emulate these actions and thereby also fall into sin. So, while Paul will eventually forbid their actions on theological grounds, here he is more concerned with their attitude to the situation.

For us, the lessons should be clear. The common basis of our life in Christ is not "knowledge" but the uniqueness of God and the death of Christ on our behalf. If we, by our actions cause others to stumble, we sin against Christ—whether we are theologically right or not. And to sin against Christ is to destroy his body, the church. Therefore, to insist on knowledge as the basis of our freedom or our "rights" is to misunderstand the gospel (Note the current debate in the USA and the "right" to attend church in spite of the "legal" question and COVID-19). While arguments from knowledge can be right, to a point, our actions are wrong if they do not stem from love.

Therefore, personal behaviour is not dictated by knowledge, freedom, or law, but by love for those within the community of faith. A love that is based on the unity of God and the saving work of Christ on the cross.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.