

Liberty & Responsibility

What you've just heard is, believe it or not, only the beginning of an argument by Paul about a topic that seems to be of very little relevance to Christians in the United States in the year of our Lord Two Thousand and Fifteen. In fact, this discourse on food sacrificed to idols takes up all of chapters 8, 9, and 10 of I Corinthians and I think a good argument could be made that Paul's instructions concerning the Lord's Supper, a portion of which you hear me read at every Communion service, actually spring from this long section on food. Part of the argument that Paul makes here continues to wind into the famous chapter 13 description of love. If I was to follow the Epistle readings in the Revised Common Lectionary, I could preach on Paul's thoughts about food offered to idols for the next three weeks and then pick it up again next year during Lent, although curiously the lectionary omits two verses which I consider key. But I don't intend to subject you (or me) to such an effort. I think that in our abbreviated time this morning I can give enough background to satisfy the most curious among you as well as calling out some of the ways that I see Paul's concern being played out in our post-modern era.

I'll start, as usual, with context. What we know as First Corinthians is just a part of a long correspondence between Paul and one of the churches that he planted on his missionary journeys. Paul himself refers to at least one previous letter from him to the congregation and some scholars believe that what has come down to us as First and Second Corinthians are actually several letters edited down into two. It's also clear that Paul is responding directly at points to questions or comments sent to him by the Corinthians in response to his letters. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that we use as our primary translation here at Good Shepherd Baptist, the editors have set several phrases in this chapter in quotation marks, signifying what they believe to be Paul repeating back his correspondents' points in order to make his own arguments.

"Now, concerning food sacrificed to idols," as Paul wrote, we must remember that the dominant culture of Corinth, a very busy seaport, was pagan, as was the rest of the Roman world. An enormous number of gods were worshipped in Corinth – not just the pantheon of the native Greeks but also representative gods from every nation that came as merchants, sailors, soldiers of Rome, and slaves. For the vast majority of these, just as in the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, a primary act of worship was the offering of foodstuffs to the god. Just as we heard in our review of I Samuel 3 two weeks ago, not all of the food offered in sacrifice would have been burned. A portion would have been reserved for the priests and servants of the deity and a portion would be consumed by the worshippers, either as part of worship or, very commonly, later in a sort of public or invited celebration within the precincts of the temple. Invitation to such meals was as common as the parties that many of us will be attending this afternoon and, just as you don't have to be a football fan to go to a Super Bowl party, you didn't have to be an adherent of a particular god to go to a party at that sect's temple. Another portion of the unburned food or perhaps that of the priests would be sold in the marketplace for needed cash. City dwellers were likely to buy this food as part of their normal grocery shopping, right alongside other food bought directly from farmers. This was especially true of meat.

The problem, as outlined by Paul, is that Christians who attended parties at the temples of pagan gods or who even purchased the unused portion of the food offered in sacrifice could be seen as paying respect to those gods or at least acknowledging their existence. This, of course, was in direct conflict with the Jewish and Christian assertion that there was only One True God and that

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God alone deserved worship. Whoever was in charge of correspondence with Paul in the church at Corinth, if the editors of the NRSV are correct, had written to him with their arguments that their understanding of doctrine was sound and that the issue of where and what they ate wasn't important. We might reconstruct their argument this way, using the quotation marks in chapter 8: "All of us (here in Corinth) possess knowledge," in other words, "we remember what you taught us." "No idol in the world really exists; there is no God but one." This was both their continued reassurance to Paul that they were still in harmony with his message and part of their argument that it didn't matter if they ate food offered to idols. "Since we don't believe in them," in other words, "they don't exist and we're making real world choices without regard to fantasies. They're not real, they can't hurt us." Finally, "Food will not bring us close to God," sounds like they are reminding Paul of the fact that the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem had lifted most dietary requirements from Gentile believers, primarily on the strength of arguments from Paul himself. The attitude of the Corinthians seems to be, "Why are you bothering us with this?"

Paul, of course, had his reasons. Throughout his argument in the next three chapters and then as he shades that argument to other conflicts, his focus is on the impact that certain actions by certain Christians will have on other Christians. Here in chapter 8, he begins by reminding them that love is more important than knowledge, that what they may or may not "know" should take second place to how they are caring for others. In their pagan city, where every inhabitant has grown up convinced of the reality of many gods, not everyone will be able to shed that belief entirely, even after their conversion to the Way of Jesus. If new Christians who are uncertain in their beliefs see their leaders acting in a way that seems to imply that it's alright to worship other gods, they will also engage in such behavior without the mental caveats those "with knowledge" say they have. Before long, they could abandon the new teaching entirely and simply return to paganism with Christ and the Father added to their personal pantheon.

For me, the best summary of what Paul is getting at is in that section of chapter 10 which I mentioned earlier is strangely omitted in the lectionary. Verses 23 & 24 read: "All things are lawful," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other." It is a lovely expression of one of Paul's most consistent themes and, indeed, one of the great themes of Jesus. It is a corollary to Jesus' citation of the second great commandment — "Love your neighbor as you love yourself — as well as to his words we remember as the Golden Rule — "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Paul goes on throughout the rest of I Corinthians to remind his friends that they are supposed to be focusing on each other's needs, not on their own desires. He turns his attention in chapter 11 to distracting fashion trends and then, more memorably, to the chaos that had grown up around the "love feast" which the early Church observed before the Lord's Supper was reduced to crackers and grape juice. He reminds them of the origin of Communion, in those verses which I will repeat in a few minutes, so that they can refocus on the shared experience and not on who brought the best lunch and who gets to share it. After addressing more selfish behavior in worship in chapter 12, he writes, "And I will show you a still more excellent way." This is the introduction to the well-known "Love Chapter."

Paul's admonition to love unselfishly has many daily applications for us. I encourage you to reflect on those when we take our time of meditation during communion, while the elements are

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distributed and Pam expresses her prayers to our Loving Creator through the piano. But there are some specific lessons that I want to touch on this morning, all of which have manifested themselves to me in the controversies of our world and culture in recent months. Most, if not all of them, have been associated by my friend Susanne Kromberg and by me with those words of Paul: ““All things are lawful,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” They are questions of what we may do legally and what we should avoid out of consideration of our sisters and brothers. They are questions of liberty and responsibility.

First, as you might suspect if you saw the newsletter this week, I want to offer some thoughts on the *Charlie Hebdo* incident. For those of you not “in the know,” *Charlie Hebdo* is a satiric magazine based in Paris. They have a history of publishing cartoons ridiculing Muslims and especially of printing cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). They have persisted in this latter policy despite outbreaks of violent protest in other parts of the world caused by such cartoons. On the morning of January 7, two men broke into the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and opened fire on the staff, killing 11 and wounding another 11. Almost immediately, an internet meme swept the world. Wishing to demonstrate solidarity with the slain and injured, it proclaimed in many languages, “I am *Charlie*... Je suis *Charlie Hebdo*.”

Let me be very clear about my feelings. What happened in Paris was an atrocity, the work of extremists. Those gunmen were as far from the will of Allah and of Muhammad as can be. There is no excuse for murder – not blasphemy, not offended sensibilities, no excuse. But I am *not Charlie Hebdo*. While my deep sympathies are with the families of the slain and with the injured, I do not see them as noble representatives of the freedom of the press or the freedom of speech. I see them at best as well-meaning critics who forgot or never knew the Golden Rule. They were indeed free to publish those cartoons, just as the Corinthians were free to eat food offered to idols. But like the Corinthians, they failed to take into account how their actions would impact their “weaker brothers.” The Muslim population of France, by any measure, are weaker brothers. They are a minority, they are legally discriminated against, they are subject to a great deal of “non-legal” discrimination. Their position in France is much like that of our Black sisters and brothers under Jim Crow. Kicking a people when they are down is not loving and it is not responsible. I grieve for those who were hurt and killed at *Charlie Hebdo* but they exercised their liberty without sufficient regard to their responsibility.

Incidentally, while I did not join in the “Je suis *Charlie*” campaign, I did repost a message that came around a day or two later: “Je suis Ahmed.” Ahmed Merabet was one of the two policemen killed by the gunmen who invaded the *Charlie Hebdo* offices. Like his killers, he was a Muslim. Unlike them, he died defending the rights of others to insult what he held most dear. When I read his story, all I could think of were some other words of Paul, this time from his letter to the Romans: “...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

““All things are lawful,” but not all things are beneficial.” I have often thought, over the years, that this was one of the most potent arguments in my mind for new laws in the United States regulating the sale and ownership of guns. I have spoken at length on this topic from this pulpit before and I will not do so this morning. But it seems to me that the debate over gun safety laws

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revolves around our different understandings of the balance between liberty and responsibility. What are we free to do and what duty toward our fellow human beings should constrain us? I come from a part of the country where gun ownership is about as common as automobile ownership; perhaps more since many gun owners receive their first gun as a gift years before they can legally drive. My dad owned a pistol left over from his days in the National Guard, where he won a sharpshooters medal. My father-in-law is a responsible gun owner and was for many years a federally licensed gun dealer, as was my best friend from college. Guns are remarkable pieces of engineering and art. Target shooting is fun. But there are far too many guns; too many fall into the wrong hands; there are too many accidents. Our national fascination with things that go “bang” has caused too many to focus on our liberty instead of on our responsibility. We must continue the national discussion about what is beneficial and lay aside our fixation on what is lawful when it comes to guns.

I would also suggest that our fascination with things that go “bang” has been a major cause for division here in Lynnwood. As our friend Carlin knows, I quoted these same two verses in a City Council meeting during a public hearing about fireworks. ““All things are lawful,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” We had received countless letters and e-mails and heard citizen after citizen plead with us to ban fireworks from Lynnwood because of the disruption to their lives – their fear of property damage, the uncontrollable reactions to loud noises by those with PTSD, their sorrow over the suffering induced in their pets and in the wildlife of our area. And yet, there had been a few who defended the use of fireworks, because it seemed to them particularly patriotic or because they made money from it. The tipping point for me and the thing that caused me to quote Scripture in a council meeting (which I try not to do), was the two pastors who testified that the sale of fireworks made up a crucial part of their church’s budget and that their ministry would suffer if fireworks were banned. Seriously? Were those men so deaf to the voices of their neighbors that they thought they weren’t doing indelible harm to the ministry of Christ by continuing to sell fireworks? Incredible! They, like those long-ago church leaders in Corinth, were standing on their liberty without due regard to their responsibility.

That is not, it seems to me, an accurate reflection of the teachings of Christ. It is not what Jesus came for, to show us how to cling to our prerogatives at the expense of others. Instead, as Paul wrote to the Philippians: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” It is this sacrifice, Paul reminded the Corinthians, that we who follow in the Way of Jesus are to remember on a regular basis, whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup. What we do then, as we are to do in a moment, is not just to remember but to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again – a death not suffered for his own glory but on our behalf. This is what we remember when we feed the poor and heal the sick. This is what we remember when we open our door to our neighbor. This is what we remember when we love. This is what we remember when we find our Loving Creator, not up above us somewhere, but in our very hearts. Thanks be to God!