

Building Loving Community
I Corinthians 8
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Nancy Hutchison Enderle

I was recently at a dinner party where the guests each brought a dish to share and the hosts provided the main dish. It was a lovely gathering of people who didn't know each other all that well. Introductions were made, and we were engaging in pleasant conversation when the hostess said to the group, "I hope you're hungry, I've got two kinds of lasagna, one for meat eaters – and one for vegetarians." We thanked her for preparing such a thoughtful meal and she added, "I'm glad to do it, it's so much easier than the hassle we face at my office when we try to have a meal, because one of our colleagues is a vegan. That's next to impossible!"

You've probably guessed what happened next. An uncomfortable silence fell over the room and one of the guests looked rather awkwardly around at the people who apparently knew that, yes, she was in fact a vegan.

If you're unfamiliar with vegans, they refrain from eating any food that has been derived wholly or partially from a living animal. In addition to any meat, this rules out eggs, cheese, milk, even Jell-O. After we laughed politely about the hostess' snafu – everyone at the party went into action; we each started reviewing what we had put into our particular dishes, labels were read, and the host scoured the pantry for vegan-friendly food. It was a flurry of activity, as well meaning adjustments were made to the salad, and dessert. In the end, it turned out only the homemade bread was vegan ready.

I thought of that scene when I read Paul's advice to the Corinthians concerning food. As I mentioned when I read the lesson earlier, Paul is addressing a variety of issues that might hamper or negatively affect the community of Christians. It is quite a laundry list of concerns. Many of the chapters in the letter start with the phrases: "It has been reported to me that..." or, "Now concerning this matter of..."

Chapter 8's issue is food. He begins, "Now concerning food sacrificed to idols." The issue is meat – but it's a concern that needs some background explanation. While we might identify with planning a potluck and discovering a vegan among the guests, this issue is significantly foreign to our contemporary life. It turns out that most of the meat used in pagan temple rituals was not consumed, but rather sold. And furthermore, most people were only able to buy meat that had been used in ritual sacrifices.

The Christian community in Corinth was divided about whether eating this meat was acceptable or not. The faithful Jews in their midst were on one end of the spectrum in their total prohibition of this meat, with the Gnostic pagans on the other, and any number of factions falling somewhere between those two extremes.

Like most concerns about belief and practice, bringing these divergent perspectives together was dicey. That's why throughout 1st Corinthians Paul's responses are multifaceted with layers and

complexities, otherwise his letter could have been a pamphlet with rules in it. Yes to this, no to that.

When Paul speaks of those who are puffed up with knowledge, he's addressing the strong Christians who most likely occupied positions of affluence and influence as they moved through the upper classes of pagan society. They were familiar with the philosophy – and could argue and articulate sophisticated positions on the nature of thought, beliefs and practice. But Paul also had to consider the concerns of those with less exposure to the prevailing information of the day, and approached the subject of eating meat from pagan rituals with much fear and superstition.

Scholar, Gerd Theissen from Germany describes Paul's dilemma and resolution: "Paul's solution is a compromise. The wishes (or prejudices) of the weak are upheld just as is the knowledge (and social privilege) of the strong... these solutions allow social inequities to continue but transfuses them with a spirit of concern, of respect, and of personal solicitude."

What becomes clear when reading 1st Corinthians Chapter 8, within the context of the entire letter, is that Paul's overarching agenda is to build a diverse community of believers. Into this highly stratified social setting, Paul addresses this challenge by introducing the radical teachings that Jesus Christ shared in his work. The rules would be different. The strong would not dominate the weak, and their choices and behaviors would be held accountable not based on their proper knowledge or their ability to articulate their beliefs intellectually – but rather whether or not their actions edified or built up the community of Christians.

This perspective echoes several of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. One that comes quickly to mind is the Good Samaritan, where the rule-keeping intellectuals remained true to their knowledge of the law, but failed to respond with compassion to the victim on the road.

So how do we make the journey from the issues of Corinth to Madison? I'd like to suggest that it's not all that hard to bring our two worlds together; that thousands of years ago in many regards, the Corinthians faced essentially the same issues we do today. Chalk it up to human nature, but for one reason or another it is tough to prioritize the needs of the community over our own particular perspectives. What Paul is asking of the Corinthians, and of us, is demanding. It's so much more comfortable to get into social or discussion groups of like-minded thinkers and to look down upon those who haven't had the same education or don't prescribe to the same doctrinal schools of thought. It is particularly difficult to release those issues that we feel make such good sense to us. That's probably why you'll find a lot of people who have learned to stay away from religion and politics when having pleasant social discourse.

In the face of these difficulties- our obstinate human tendencies, what power or force could possibly neutralize our potential to divide and damage community? Paul tells us 5 short chapters later in 1 Corinthians 13 that there is one such power, and that is the power of love. Love that is not rude or boastful, love that does not insist on it's own way. Love that believes all things, hopes all things, bears all things.

Kirster Stendahl, a Harvard scholar writes about this in the cover quote: "Love overcomes the divisiveness of my zeal for having it my way in the name of my own integrity."

That's the answer, the key, and the heart of the community. It isn't a rule list, a point of view, a way of thinking, or a cozy feeling, it is love, the transforming love of Christ; the love that knocked Paul off his horse and blinded him with its intensity. A life-altering love that recognizes the presence of Christ in our own heart, and in our brothers and sisters.

Much like the concern for the vegan guest at the party caused us to scramble and adjust our menu— Christian communities are called to accommodate the divergent needs of those in our midst. Not to judge or criticize – in the same way our vegan friend didn't harangue us for our participation in the slaughter of animals. We look for the ways to let the joy of our gathered community take precedence over one or another's particular inclinations; for the sake of the dinner party – for the sake of the community.

Can we do this in the Church? Covenant? Presbyterians? Christians? If we're really honest, we have to admit that sometimes churches are the very places where all this good Christian love is most difficult to identify. I've heard any number of troubling episodes where people felt judged or excluded in the halls of a church. I remember an incident that happened here after we first began attending 8 or 9 years ago. My children were 2 and 4 years old, my husband was traveling and my father was terminally ill. It was a tense time, and I was trying to hold it together. On this particular Sunday, during the time for the passing of the peace, an older woman in the pew in front of ours turned sharply around as I held out my hand and said, "You ruin worship for me every time you sit near me. Can't you sit somewhere else or do something to keep your children quiet?" With my hand still extended and a stunned deer-in-the-headlights reaction, I said, "the peace of Christ,"... and she snarled, "I'm not sharing the peace with you!" and turned her back toward me.

Now let me be clear, I'm not telling this story because I offer some beacon of virtue through my reactions. I couldn't get out of the sanctuary fast enough, I think I left with my children when they exited for kaleidoscope - and I thought about never coming back. I was tremendously shaken and practiced several retaliatory responses in my imagination, none of which were remotely spiritual. But in the end, I never would see the woman at coffee hour and I refused to confront her in the sanctuary – as she had done to me. It's been years since I've seen her, and we never did air our grievances with each other in a civil, Christian manner. As I reflect on that event in light of Paul's counsel to the Corinthians, it occurs to me that the two of us could probably have clearly articulated our grievances, we could've most likely use our knowledge to explain or defend our experience, we could've 'puffed up' our own sense of rightness or wrongness. But Paul would direct our course down a different path, toward love and forgiveness. I regret we never reached that place, and encourage any of you who carry wounds within this fellowship to consider allowing Christ's reconciling love to begin the healing process.

It's demanding work to participate in a community that actively builds the fellowship on love. The puffy knowledge side is easier and more similar to what we encounter in the rest of our lives. But there's a tremendously helpful little book written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "Life Together" that can help. Many of you may remember, Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor/theologian who lived in Germany during WW2 and was executed by the Nazis in 1946.

“Life Together” reads like a modern Pauline letter; he was organizing a community of underground seminarians and he details the pitfalls and possibilities of Christian community in very practical terms. He realistically acknowledges that there will be times where we need to practice the spiritual discipline of forbearance, that forgiveness and confession will be central experiences of living together. But most importantly he emphasizes that everything we do in community hinges NOT upon our reliance on another or someone’s gifts or strengths, but on the love and grace of Christ who calls us into community for the service of all. Bonhoeffer goes as far as saying that we are not called into relationship with each other, but with Christ. We relate to each other THROUGH Christ. He writes, “It is not what a person is in him or herself as a Christian, his spirituality, her piety, that constitutes the basis of community. What determines our brother and sisterhood is what that person is by reason of what Christ has done to both of us.”

It gives us something to think about at coffee hour as we move through our conversations and connections. It brings to mind that commercial where people walk around under the shelter of a big red umbrella – which is the symbol of some insurance company. Borrowing that image, we walk around with the symbol of the cross shadowing over us and between us as we meet and move through our community.

This is good news for us – here today and into eternity. It is the living presence of Christ who gathers us, who supports us in our weakness and the folly of our strength. That is the foundation of spiritual community. In human community we may be drawn to one or another through our personalities and common interests, but here, we are drawn into community and service through Christ. When we tangle with each other, and we do, and we will, each interaction is an opportunity to remember that Christ forgives us and calls us to step into a fuller awareness of the grace that puts you in the same footing as me. That puts someone with whom you disagree in the same place of importance as you. It is after all a cross that anchors and centers our worship space, not a mirror – or a picture of the “member of the month” like they do in the grocery store.

There’s a funny story that’s been told a lot about the writing of the Brief Statement of Faith – which is the most recent of our confessional documents. One of the writers, Jack Stotts, a friend and mentor of mine, said the hardest point in writing the confession was that so many people who read it balked at the phrase “we deserve God’s condemnation.” Jack said people would give them feedback all the time suggesting the words “we deserve condemnation” be substituted with “some deserve God’s condemnation.” He’d tell the story, then with a characteristic twinkle in his eye he’d say, “But that’s just the point isn’t it? That one word changes every thing. If only some of us are in need of repentance and forgiveness, then the focus is immediately taken off of God’s grace and put on what we might do to earn our place of favor with God.”

I can think of no more important message for this church, for any church. Love builds up. Love from Christ, who has graciously and undeservedly forgiven all of us – not some of us. It is through him that we are drawn into community. May God bless us as we seek to live out that glorious and challenging call.

Amen