

A Sermon for Epiphany 4, Year B
January 29, 2006 — 1st Corinthians 8:1b–13
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What was going on in Corinth?

When I read this morning's reading from 1st Corinthians, I found myself wondering just what was going on in Corinth? After doing some research, I think I found the answer. In the first century in Corinth, it's very likely that the best meat available for public consumption was sold in the markets set up outside, and run by, the pagan temples. And there were two reasons for this. First, those pagan worshipers, though they *were* pagans, knew that you didn't bring any poor quality animal flesh for sacrifice at their local pagan temple. And, second, since the pagan temple got their supply of meat at not cost to them, they could sell their meat at a deep discount to you. So, if you were a Christian in Corinth in the first century, and you wanted to purchase some good meat for the dinner table, you knew where to shop first.

Of course, there was a potential problem. You see, it was believed that, when animal flesh was offered for sacrifice at the pagan temple, the spirit of that pagan idol somehow took possession of it and entered into it. So, when that very same meat was later sold by the temple's meat vendors, and taken home and cooked and eaten, the person doing the eating would be taking that pagan idol's spirit into their bodies.

Some of the Christians in Corinth had a real problem with this. For they understood that their bodies were a repository, a temple if you will, for the Holy Spirit of God. And the presence of God's Spirit in their lives, not to mention their bodies, somehow made them pure and holy. But when you consumed some of that pagan temple meat, and apparently put into your body the spirit of that pagan idol, you were defiling yourself. You were somehow betraying God.

However, there were other Christians living in Corinth who knew better. They knew that the pagan idols were nothing but lifeless figurines of wood, stone or metal. They knew there was no pagan spirit within them. And they knew that eating the meat sold by the pagan meat vendors did nothing to defile them, or harm them spiritually.

So, here you have, in the church in Corinth, two groups who were deeply divided on the issue of whether or not to eat the meat that was offered to the pagan idols.

In the first group were those whom Paul referred to, in this morning's reading, as those who "possess knowledge," those who will gladly eat the meat sold by the pagan temple vendors, because they know that "no idol in the world really exists," and because they know that choosing their food carefully "will not bring us close to God."

And in the second group are those whom Paul referred to as "the weak" or those whose "conscience is weak," who "have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol." And even though they may believe in the greatness of

God, they have a hard disabusing themselves of the notion that the spirits of the pagan idols inhabit the meat offered for sacrifice at their temples.

So, in short, here are the two groups: those in the first group have reached a certain level of understanding and knowledge, and those in the second group have *not* yet reached that same level, and the two groups are really at odds. I can easily imagine the members of the first group referring to the others as ignorant and backward, and the members of the second group referring to the others as naive and short-sighted.

So what's Paul to do? I think he did the right thing. He told the folks in the first group that he agreed with their reasoning. He agrees that there is no danger in eating the meat offered to pagan idols. But, he goes on to explain, that is not the most important point. The more important consideration was the health of the community, and if the dining habits of those in the first group threaten to divide the Body of Christ, then they need to go on a diet.

When I was a young Boy Scout in North Carolina, I participated on a fifty-mile hike. There were several hundred scouts gathered for an event that would take us the better part of a week to accomplish, and I was excited to be a part of it. Even to this day, I remember especially two things about that event. First, I remember how hard it was on my feet, because I did not have very good hiking boots. And, second, and this was the important thing for me, before we started, we were told that we were going to travel only as fast as the slowest hiker among us. No one would be left behind. Keeping the group together, the leaders explained to us, was more important than getting to our destination quickly.

For Paul, what was at stake in the church in Corinth, was not the quality of meat on the home dining table, but the quality of the community of faith. "Therefore," he would write to those in the know, "if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." And I think Paul did the right thing because, sometimes, being right is not as important as being loving. Amen.