

A Genuine Unity Speech or, Better Than Being Right

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany - January 31, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one.' Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 'Food will not bring us close to God.' We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

In this age of political tensions when a spirit of peace and unity is so badly needed, there are few things so annoying as having to listen to a unity speech. Yes, we *need* unity, but most speeches which are called unity speeches are a far cry from actually being unity speeches. More often than not the speaker is calling for people to rally to their particular beliefs and is not actually interested in compromise or a middle ground. Rather than unite us, these kinds of appeals aggravate us! But I urge you all

to hear me out on this Lord's Day morning, for I am sharing the divine insights of one who truly understood what is involved in creating unity. Paul, in his counsel offered to the badly divided Corinthian Church, gives us plenty to ponder and some very practical steps which we can take toward restoring the Church and the badly divided world around us.

The specific controversy which Paul is addressing in this passage does not sound very interesting or relevant to our day, which has caused many to skip over this reading, thinking it unimportant. The problem at hand may sound odd to modern years, but the lesson at the root of this teaching is eternal and powerful. Paul is addressing an argument in the church about food sacrificed to idols. In the ancient world idols were everywhere. At a market place the vendors usually had an idol at their stand, and there or wherever the meat which they were selling had been slaughtered and prepared, this meat was dedicated to that idol and the pagan god which it represented. There were not restaurants as we know them in the ancient world, but people would commonly gather at a pagan temple where there was a space and tables for dining, and yes, the meat which was offered had been dedicated to that temple's god. Nearly all meat offered for sale in the ancient world had been sacrificed to idols. The question was, is this meat acceptable for a Christian to eat, or was doing so participating in idol worship? Some saw no harm in consuming this meat while others were horrified at the very thought of eating this polluted food. Who was right? Was it the eaters or the abstainers?

Paul wasted little time in explaining that the eaters were correct and that the abstainers were wrong. *Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one.'* Indeed, even though *there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.* Idols amount to nothing in this world as they are mere blocks of carved wood or stone. God is the one true and mighty God. He then urges the believers to not let these ever-present idols distract us or make us feel that they have any value or any control over us. Enjoy the meal, praise God for it, and get on with life! Paul speaks of *those who have knowledge* as the ones who understand his teaching, and those who continued to be unsettled by this tainted meat as the *weak*. These are people who we would say have overly sensitive consciences, and are too easily upset by something possibly being wrong. Many of these weak believers had once been heavily involved in idol worship, and any reminder of their former allegiances could greatly unsettle them.

This would seem to be the end of the discussion. Paul had clearly stated that the meat eaters were correct and that the abstainers were wrong. It would seem to us that the only remaining matter was to convince the abstainers of their error. But this was *not*

the end of the discussion and Paul's plan of action was different from our expectation. It was only the beginning, and Paul's greater concern was with something far more important than being correct! In fact, Paul's real concern was for those who were correct. Bad things can happen when we are in error, but even worse things can happen when we are correct! Paul begins this teaching on the meat controversy with a few cryptic verses, which may now begin to make sense. *Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.* These are difficult verses to fully interpret, but consider the general teaching of Paul being expressed. He was speaking a warning to those who have knowledge. While knowledge is generally a good thing, it can cause many troubles. It can *puff up* people, that is, it can make them proud and very full of themselves, which is very dangerous. There is a greater knowledge, and that is to know God's perspective on a matter and to understand the call of love upon a believer. It is not enough to be smart or even to be right. The great question is what would love lead us to do? Paul then leads us through a loving inquiry into how we might better do God's will in the middle of a controversy.

Having established the correct answer as to whether it is moral to eat food which has been sacrificed to an idol, Paul now pursues what he sees as the real and crucial question. How can we be loving as well as correct? He begins by considering the mind and spirit of the former idolater who has become a believer in Jesus Christ. The old saying goes that "we must not judge a person until we have walked a mile in their shoes." This is a wonderful truth to carry with us as it expresses biblical truth and Christ-like love. It is also a badly abused cliché as it is often quoted, but seldom obeyed! The only time I hear this phrase stated is when a person accuses others of not trying to better understand them and their point of view. We are quick to expect others to obey this maxim as they deal with us, yet we are very slow to actually take time and effort to study the lives and experiences of others. Paul makes a real effort to understand these weak believers. In this passage we sense his deep concern for these poor people who have had to endure so many years of living in bondage to pagan gods. Idol worship in those days often involved temple prostitution and other traumatic experiences, and Paul realized that such memories are not easily erased, and could be awakened by the smallest reminder of idols. These *weak* people are not to be chided and corrected, as much as they are to be supported, encouraged and loved.

It also bears mentioning that idols are still something to be taken seriously. Paul did not want believers to be paralyzed by every minor contact they had with idols, such as the matter of the meat business of that day, but there was a wider discussion of idols to be had, and idols were still a force to be reckoned with. In chapter ten of this letter, he warned the Corinthians against falling back into idolatry. At the very end of John's first letter, we hear a warning to stay away from idols. Idols were a matter to

be dealt with in the ancient world, and though Christ has given us power to rise above pagan practices, we must not become glib or proud about the matter. We walk humbly with God, confess our weakness and depend upon God's protection.

In this matter of meat and idols we find Paul dealing with what we commonly call a matter of conscience. Moral issues are usually not simple matters and there are countless disagreements which people of faith have about various controversies. Christians commonly disagree as to the proper response to such things as alcohol, gambling, participating in warfare, and all kinds of political issues. In this passage we find Paul pleading for freedom on individual conscience and mutual respect. Paul stepped into many church controversies, and we commonly think of him as being very dogmatic and unbending in his beliefs. Later in Corinthians we find him weighing in on a debate over Christ's death and resurrection. Here was an essential matter of faith which could not be compromised as some Corinthians were doing, and Paul was adamant that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again. But Paul was not always so unbending and there were a surprising number of arguments in which Paul urged both sides to respect each other and to simply agree to disagree. If he were among us today, we would probably be shocked by his flexibility and pleas for understanding and grace!

The big and central question for Paul was this. What is the loving thing to do? We are quick to seek the correct opinion on a matter, but this should only be the beginning of our search. Knowing what we know, what can we do to show love and help to the weak? How can we build up the wider church? Paul speaks a stern word of warning as he urges us to do no harm to more sensitive believers. To those who would bruise the faith of those with a sensitive conscience he says, *So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.* How many times we have proudly spoken our "superior" understanding on certain matters, not realizing the harm that we may be doing to those whose faith may not be strong.

This is truly a message for our day, both for our church and our nation. The record of the church over the centuries is not good in terms of our getting along in love. The thousands of denominations and countless controversies which divide us are an embarrassment to us. In my lifetime I have witnessed the church's increased participation in matters political, and this has been happening at both ends of the political spectrum. It cannot be denied that certain political matters demand a response from the church, with the civil rights movement being a prime example. The problem is that countless denominations weigh in on all kinds of social issues, most of which could be classified as matters of conscience on which faithful people will likely disagree. This is a recipe for further division! What is needed is not more heated rhetoric but greater understanding of each other. Paul's teaching invites us to a truce

with those with whom we may disagree, and to take time to better understand *their* point of view and experience. We must become better at agreeing to disagree!

This path of love is not always an easy one. I will presume that Paul loved a good steak, but all the same would declare: *Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.* It was more important for Paul to be loving than to be right! Paul's teachings do demand that we seek wisdom as to how we apply these truths to daily life. It does not appear that Paul wanted the Corinthians to all become vegetarians, but he did want them to show reasonable discretion in how they purchased and consumed meat. He certainly did not want them flaunting their freedom in Christ by making a spectacle of their meat consumption. In all that we do, let us be led by love. Let us regularly ask ourselves, what might offend, and what is likely to build up and encourage others? Will what I do and say build up or tear down? Will it bring glory to myself or to Christ? Is it loving or selfish?

Our world is increasingly obsessed by knowledge. As our world becomes more and more technological our schools take an ever more central part in community life, and the focus which that promotes is to be the smartest person. We are teaching our children that smart is everything, and this is just not true. A lack of knowledge is not our problem as for better and for worse, our world has no shortage of smart people. I fondly remember the television program "Leave it to Beaver," about young Theodore "Beaver" Cleaver and the struggles of being a grade school boy. Beaver was an amiable boy of average intelligence. In his classroom and always seated near him was Judy. Her clothes were always neatly pressed and her braids were in perfect place. She also knew all the rules of the classroom and was quick to raise her hand, either to give the correct answer, or to point out Beaver's errors. In light of our lesson, I offer this question. Which does our world need more of—Beavers or Judys?

"*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*" Let us be better than smart.