

### 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

<sup>1</sup> Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. <sup>2</sup> Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. <sup>3</sup> But whoever loves God is known by God.

<sup>4</sup> So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” <sup>5</sup> For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), <sup>6</sup> yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

<sup>7</sup> But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. <sup>8</sup> But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

<sup>9</sup> Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup> So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. <sup>12</sup> When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

### Mark 1:21-28

<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. <sup>22</sup> The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. <sup>23</sup> Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, <sup>24</sup> “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

<sup>25</sup> “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” <sup>26</sup> The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

<sup>27</sup> The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”

<sup>28</sup> News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

“No Stumbling Block”  
Lisa Durkee Abbott  
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Out of our beliefs are born deeds; out of our deeds we form habits; out of our habits grows our character; and on our character we build our destiny.” - Henry Hancock

My message this morning really centers on the passage from Paul’s letter, but I wanted to say something very quickly, very directly about our Gospel lesson, as well. You see, without understanding who Jesus was, and who Jesus is, our motivation may well be weak. We may struggle with what Paul is asking us to do in his admonishment to the Corinthians. Jesus was a man who spoke with authority in such a way that all who heard him recognized that his teaching was new and significant. I choose to believe that Jesus *was God* incarnate in a human being who walked among *us so that we would know what God’s reign looks like*. Jesus teaches, Jesus heals, and those who met him recognized him as the Holy One of God. In Mark’s Gospel, this is the first glimpse we have of Jesus in the public eye—masterful, challenging, and healing. So, as we focus our attention on Paul’s teaching, let’s keep in mind that Paul’s own motivation was to serve the one who called him out; who moved in him so strongly that he left his old life behind. We are invited to do the same, and we are given clear instructions in this passage for Corinthians if we listen closely. In one simple phrase, we can consider that scripture calls us to hold our convictions but always with humility. “It is more important to be loving than to be right.”

I found myself thinking this week about a class I took in seminary. In the first moments of this two-week intensive course, my professor said, “well, basically, this is a stupid course.” To think that we could cover much of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity in two weeks was probably ridiculous, and I am grateful that I had already studied these traditions as an undergrad and also had more opportunities in graduate school. Still, one of the things that was cool about the class was spending time in worship in each of the three traditions that was new to me. I was most struck by our visit to a Hindu temple, where my professor, an American Baptist, comfortably cupped the smoke from incense burned as offering, and brought it to his face. He also ate some of the fruit that had been placed on the altar. In my mind, I was struck and struggled with the idea of what looked to me like eating food for idols. Even these years later, I am grateful for Rick Morley’s discussion of this morning’s passage from Corinthians; it helps me make sense of my professor’s comfort and helps me know why I would now do similarly, comfortably. Aware now of my own reaction to this moment in the temple, I am less surprised at my own mother’s horror when, on a long ride across the plains in India, she and I had different responses to our driver’s worship. We had stopped at a roadside shrine to Ganesh, the elephant-headed deity, where our driver and his

companion first prayed and then drank from a cup of red liquid that was on the altar. He then offered it to me, and I feigned drinking, to my mother's intense horror. I didn't actually drink, probably at the time more for reasons of good health than an aversion to foreign practices, but for my mom it was clearly a kind of abomination.

I am grateful for the framing that Rick Morley provides. "For while [Paul] argues that the meat is fine to eat, he's worried about the emotional & spiritual state of those who might eat it, or see it eaten. Some former pagans may have grown up sacrificing to idols, and participating fully in the sacrificial cults of idolatry. For them to then go back and eat the same meat offered in the same ways, may feel like backsliding. . . . I think this shows that not everything—even the first and second commandments—has an easy interpretation. Different Christians, who hold Christ in the highest regard and who faithfully participate in His Body, can disagree on things.

It also says, at least as Paul is concerned, that reason is a valuable tool in interpreting what's right and wrong in the Christian faith and life. And, perhaps most importantly, we find that even when you have the "correct answer," that's not enough. There are pastoral and spiritual implications of keeping the whole Body together. And those implications are more important than being right.

Sometimes, for the sake of the Body of Christ, it's better to choose the salad, and hold off on the hamburger. At least for a while." This ends our passage from Rick Morley, and I find myself thinking a lot about my oldest brother in this context. He converted to Orthodox Christianity over thirty years ago, and though his perspective has softened a great deal since then, he was convinced that those of us who believed differently were damned to hell. That was a concept I hadn't really considered before then, and I had a hard time reconciling it with the fact that he had spent years chanting with a Nichiren Shoshu sect of Buddhism. He again spends time at a sangha, a Buddhist community where he finds comfort in chanting and, no longer holding the zeal of a new convert, can allow the rest of us our own beliefs. For decades, though, I questioned his need to fast, even foregoing our Thanksgiving and Christmas turkey—and eating far more lentils than is probably good for a person (here with a smile, for sure). As we all lived into *his* fast, whoever prepared the feast would make sure to include more protein rich vegetarian options and loads of vegetables altogether. Reading Paul's words to the Corinthians helps me make sense of this even now.

More generally, more globally, there are also ways that we allow for our lives' experiences to be different, and let even our worship practices to be different, without

judgement. Even in our own community, we can consider the Communion elements, for example. We don't want sharing in our sacramental meal together to be a stumbling block for those who would not drink alcohol; so, we offer grape juice, of the same vine. We don't want persons with Celiac disease to suffer because of sharing with us; so, we offer gluten free options when we are together.

About the general sense of there being *right and wrong worship*, Frank L. Crouch, Dean and Vice President of Moravian Theological Seminary writes the following: "Anyone who can only see "how right I am" and does not pause to consider the intrinsic value and worth of those who think and act differently misunderstands the heart of the gospel. Paul says, "If you have to choose between being loving and being right, be loving. If you see someone wavering on the brink of their faith in God, think about what you can do for that person on their terms, not on your terms." Paul calls us to humility before God and our fellow human beings, to an awareness of the immensity of our own ignorance and the enormous extent of our own capacity to fall into error."

In the midst of busy life, I know that my own spirituality sometimes lacks moments of interior practice. When my time is spent sometimes chaotically, I sometimes read examples of ancient mystics whose connection to an interior life can guide me. Teresa of Avila was a sixteenth century Spanish Mystic who was canonized by the Catholic Church after her death. In a life whose circumstances ranged from the physically challenging to the spiritually ecstatic, she fed herself with scripture, and with the writings of those for whom a life of faith led to an interior religious life. She wrote the following, which in my understanding moves us from humility that would potentially keep one apart, to activity that engages us with others, in a humility that seeks another's good. "Beg our Lord to grant you perfect love for your neighbor... If someone else is well spoken of, be more pleased than if it were yourself; this is easy enough, for if you were really humble, it would vex you to be praised... Force your will, as far as possible, to comply in all things with others' wishes although sometimes you may lose your own rights by doing so. Forget your self-interests for theirs, however much nature may rebel." I guess I have family on my mind this week, because as I read this I remember my Bam, my mom's mom, saying that marriage can be like this: you love the other person so much that you trust they will do what is necessary to keep you happy, and you seek to keep your partner happy, as well. That level of trust and commitment was something she modeled, and that stands as an example I imagine we all might long for. "Forget your self-interests for theirs, however much nature may rebel." Wow. This is where I take Jesus to be the model of selfless behavior, of service to others that is beyond my own ken.

Sure, we can ask What Jesus would say, and maybe lean even more firmly into what Jesus *did do*. There are countless examples we might put forward of where differences in our understandings of our faith can be stumbling blocks to others. For some, the task of faith is to cultivate a personal relationship with Jesus; to grow a deep spiritual life that enables them to feel close to God, and most often in private. We might think about Teresa of Avila in this way, although she also urged that we move from the understanding of our connection with God to lead to better relationships with others. For others, the task of faith begins with actively working toward justice and equality for all persons. Even in this regard, there are those who are committed most strongly to acting locally, and those whose purpose is more global. For some, a reading of the Bible is understood to contain no figurative understanding; rather, that every reckoning in it is meant to be viewed with a temporal and a literal lens. For others, the Bible's inerrant truth is its telling of God's eternal and loving relationship with humanity. In all of our differences of, well, opinion regarding what is the *right* belief within our faith, if we err on the side of loving well, on doing our best to help another live out their faith as *they believe they are right in doing*, then according to Paul, we serve them well. And isn't serving others what we are meant to be doing in the first place, if we model ourselves after our Lord, Jesus Christ?

A neat reflection called "The Limitations Imposed By Love," by the Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall, former president of Columbia Theological Seminary contains the following: "As Paul said later in this letter, "Love does not insist on its own way." And so while we acknowledge the importance of knowledge and of freedom, we also acknowledge that *what must determine our behavior is our love for one another*. We are not free to think only of our own response to a situation. We have to take in account those affected by our actions. The health of the body of Christ--the church--takes priority over our knowledge and our freedom. These are the limitations imposed by love."

Love does not insist on its own way. I'd like for you to think about this in the context of service on Jesus' behalf. What are we willing to do for and to give those we love? And aren't we supposed to love everyone? In doing so, we become not a stumbling block, but a stepping stone. And if you worry about whether or not you are strong enough, or good enough to make the kinds of decisions that will help to bring about God's reign, remember that you are not in this alone. We are in this together, and we can pray to the Holy One of God, to Jesus, who has the power and the authority to help us with every step and every choice. Thanks be to God!