

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

48th Sunday of Pandemic

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

21[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Meat, Idols, and Love for Others

Good morning! Who expected to hear a sermon about meat sacrificed to other gods this morning?! Because that's what you're going to get! As Melanie A. Howard writes: *"Preachers may be flummoxed to encounter today's New Testament reading that includes an entire chapter on 1 Corinthians, and a chapter on meat sacrificed to idols at that! However, what might seem like a bewildering text from which to derive a relevant sermon is a treatise chock full of insights that remain applicable to the present time."*¹ Hopefully, by the end of this, I will have convinced you of just that! I was on the fence about what to preach this week. We had a very interesting discussion on the Gospel reading on Monday (a Zoom Bible study everyone is invited to attend!) But I have always liked this Corinthians text, and so we had an equally challenging reflection on it. What sealed the deal was when I cracked open a commentary and read one scholar who wrote the following: *"In all of my years listening to sermons, including my own, I don't believe that I have ever heard one based on this text."*² Well that's a challenge if I ever heard one!

You see, St. Paul has a problem. Corinth, a port city in southern Greece, was the home of a Christian community that Paul had started during his travels. Roughly half of the New Testament is a collection of the letters that St. Paul would write to these house churches offering advice, encouragement, guidance, help with settling disputes, and the many other duties of a letter. While Paul addresses a variety of topics, the situation is summarized succinctly by one scholar who writes: *"The occasion for Paul's comment is that the Corinthian church has a strong faction of well*

¹<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-corinthians-81-13-5>

²Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word*. Year B. Vol. 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 302.

*educated, well-to-do, relatively sophisticated members who believe that Christians should be free to eat meat offered to idols. The reason is very simple. Idols do not exist and, therefore, have no power, since there is no God but one, as proclaimed in the Shema of Israel.”*³ So, when we look at the text and see the quotes in Paul’s letter like in I Corinthians 8:1 we are seeing the comments made by these members of the community. *“All of us possess knowledge”* they proclaim, and that *“No idol in the world really exists,”* and that *“there is no God but one.”*⁴ They argue that *“Food will not bring us close to God.”*⁵ Which is exactly the thing I used to think until I had deep fried Oreos at a county fair.

But in order to see how this first century text about meat sacrificed to other gods can tell us anything about our own faith, we need to take a step back and lay a foundation about life within the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago. What we need to understand is that when you wanted some meat or protein you couldn’t just hop in your Kroger app and schedule a contactless pickup. Most people who lived in major cities like Corinth were not able to raise livestock in the backyard. And for people who did have land for animals, the long-term benefit of things like milk and cheese from an animal over years and years outweighed the short-term benefit of a t-bone steak. But there was a place, several in every city actually, where there was an abundance of meat: temples.

You see, one of the primary forms of worship was through different types of sacrifice. And as I said, space was usually limited in major cities, so you didn’t have an animal of your own to drag to the local temple. So an entire industry had cropped up around places of worship where one could

³ Ibid.

⁴ I Corinthians 8:4 NRSV

⁵ I Corinthians 8:8 NRSV

purchase an animal for sacrifice. The very poor would sacrifice things like small birds. Someone like me could probably swing a goat. The very wealthy would bring in ox, bulls, cows, and the like. The priest of the temple would take the animal to the altar, slaughter it, and take a small portion of the animal to burn as the sacrifice to whatever god one was worshiping. But that left a large portion of the animal unused. So temples would take the rest of the meat and sell it around back, basically becoming your local butcher. “Stop on down at our new location in Corinth! Get your sacrifice handled and dinner ready all for one low price!”

The other problem was space. These early Christian communities met in members' houses. And as has always been the case, the wealthier people had the bigger homes. So Christians would gather in the homes of the wealthier members, where the Eucharist was celebrated as an actual meal together. Most of the poor had little access to education and meat. So they were naturally apprehensive about eating this meat that was tied so strongly in their minds to other gods.

Which brings us St. Paul's wonderful phrase in verse one: *“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”*⁶ You can be the smartest person in the world, but that doesn't mean you're a good person. As I mentioned to the class on Monday, take the show the Big Bang Theory. Sheldon Cooper is the smartest person in the world, but man can he be a jerk! Paul argues that just because we both know something to be true, doesn't mean that we're free to ignore the concerns of those who are still growing in their faith.

It's a radically different outlook than what most of us have grown up with. “As long as I'm not hurting you, leave me alone!” our individualistic ideals would argue. Instead Paul calls on us to sacrifice our own comforts

⁶ I Corinthians 8:1b NRSV

for our neighbors. Martin Luther argued that as Christians we are called to take on the suffering of our neighbor if they are in need. Our concern for those around us should always come first. It makes me think of those who are still refusing to wear masks. I don't wear a mask for me. I wear it to protect everyone else around me. My temporary inconvenience pales when it's compared with my call to care for my sisters and brothers.

So our text isn't really about meat at all. It's about whether we think that our own indifference or discomfort is more important than the protection and support of those we call neighbor. After all, God has called us into community together. If we can't even make small sacrifices for those who we call sisters and brothers in the faith, have we really learned Christ's message of love? Amen.