

Free to Love

Year B, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 1, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Okay, I have a problem. I like bacon – a lot. Ask any of the regulars at breakfast and they will tell you that I like biscuits and gravy way more than a man of my age and... figure ought, and that I really, *really* like bacon. I can't help it, I always have liked it. That's why, when my college friend Sam said he never *touch*ed the stuff, I kind of gave him a hard time. Actually, Sam was one of a handful of Iranians that I knew at Johns Hopkins University in the late '70s, and some of his other friends pronounced it s'Am. Yeah, I know, it is not at all uncommon for folks from that part of the world to avoid bacon – and ham, and pork chops, and, and, and. But Sam was a *Christian*. I knew because I *met* Sam at a meeting of the college group at University Baptist Church where he and I both attended for our years in Baltimore. I can remember more than a few times teasing my smiling friend with a BLT or a crisp breakfast strip, "Come on, just a bite – it'll be *good* for you." He never took me up on the offer – and he wouldn't even tell me *why*.

A couple of weeks ago when I last had a real chance to talk to you about the Christians in Corinth, we talked about a problem they were having with the connection between body and spirit. I'm pretty sure most of you remember that sermon from two weeks ago, because several of you have reminded me of the tag line with which I began it. Last week I very briefly touched on Paul's instruction that they should live like the world was coming to an end, because our life in the next should really inform our life here and now. And now Paul continues his instruction to the church he founded, this time about who should and shouldn't eat what.

A couple of weeks ago, I told you that Corinth was a happening place, and I alluded to the fact that *most* of what was happening was happening in or around the one of the temples of the Greek or Roman gods. If you were going to a business meeting, or wedding reception, or the first birthday party for your friend's daughter, the meal would likely be in one of the temples. And the main course most *certainly* would have been from there. Animal sacrifice was as big a deal in the temples of Corinth as it was in Jerusalem's Temple to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... you know, the God and Father of Jesus. A portion of the animals slaughtered in the temples was consumed in the sacrifice, of course. But *another* portion went to the priests, and *another* portion went to the government, and a portion of both *those* portions ended up for sale at banquet tables or in the markets. The bottom line was that if you were going to put meat on the table in Corinth, there was a good possibility, if not a firm *probability*, that that meat had *first* been offered to one of the pagan gods – including if your table was serving the weekly feast for the local Christian congregation.

Now these new Christians in Corinth, (at the time, every Christian was a new Christian) were mostly Gentiles, non-Jews. But they had been told that part of being a Christian was accepting at least *some* of the rules of Judaism. Specifically, part of the deal worked out between Peter and Paul was that Gentile Christians should at least, "abstain from things polluted by idols, and from fornication." We talked about that second part a couple of weeks ago, but apparently the Corinthians were having trouble with the first part too.

Some of them, it seems, wanted to stick to the rules. Others, however, made the argument that meat was meat, and it *should* be no big deal where it came from. As we heard this morning, Paul makes a very concise, very logical argument, that since there really *is* no such thing as other gods, then idols have no standing to pollute *anything*. "Aha!" said the more liberal faction, "There ya' go!" "In Christ, we're free from the old law." "It makes no sense to not eat whatever meat you can find." "It's just the *weak* ones that can't get that through their heads." "We'll show them How the law of *freedom* works."

“Only be careful,” Paul continues, and the celebration quiets, “be careful that *your* freedom doesn’t become someone *else’s* stumbling block.” “Because when you sin against a member of your family, you sin... against Christ.” Paul is all *for* freedom from the law – but *only* so that freedom opens up the way for the priority of *loving* each other.

The real problem, you see, goes back to the Garden, where our first ancestors traded the intimacy of relationship with our Creator for a bite of the knowledge of good and evil, a bite into right to *decide* for *themselves* what is good, and to *decide* what is evil. And so they chose rule over relationship. They chose decree over devotion. They chose law... over love. And so the world hasn’t been the same since Chapter 3. And so the world is what it is. *Until* the very essence of Being became one of *us*, to show how perfect freedom and perfect submission are bound up in each other. Until God himself became human and pointed out that the law is only a sickly stale substitute for the love that sang the world into being. Until Love itself came wrapped in swaddling clothes... and walked the earth... and taught the truth about *God’s* Kingdom... and carried children... and fed the hungry... and healed the sick and the lame and the sightless... and took the accumulated *failure* of the law to the place of the Skull, took *our* accumulated failure to *love*... and nailed it to a Cross.

Fast forward to 21st century America, where we know oh so *much* better than they did back in Corinth, don’t we? We know that the diseases that made pork dangerous can be eliminated, or at least controlled, and that meat is just protein. We know that demoniacs in synagogues are just troubled minds that can be set right with the proper medication. We know that through the rule of law and the triumph of education and tolerance and democracy, the human race will continue our ever upward march to ultimate freedom, justice, and peace, where we can nibble the fruit of good and evil close enough to the core, that the only *weak* ones we have to love, are the ones with *our* favorite weakness.

I got to meet Sam’s father about midway through our senior year at the Hop. We met on campus one Sunday afternoon as Sam was showing his family around. His father was very well dressed in a western suit, and his brother and young sister were in typical kid attire. But s’Am’s mother’s *burqa* and *hijab* left little doubt about the family’s Muslim faith. Sam’s father hadn’t been with him at University Baptist that morning, of course, because, as it turned out, Sam was the only *Christian* in the family. Sam grinned at what must have been the priceless look on my face as I made the connection. And the next morning at breakfast, Sam laughed as I sat down with a plate of eggs and... well, you know. I waved a crispy strip in his direction as I chuckled back, “Yeah, but *you’re* a Christian.” The smile left Sam’s face and he shook his head and looked down at my plate. “For months after I became a Christian in high school,” he said, “every time I came home from church, my dad would ask me, ‘Have those infidels taught you yet to eat dirty pig flesh?’” “He doesn’t ask anymore,” he smiled as he looked up at me, “but I can still look him in the eye and say that I don’t eat pork.” “And *now*, we can sometimes talk about why I love Jesus.”

“Knowledge puffs up,” Paul said, to more than just the Corinthians, “but *love*... *love builds up*.”