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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Deut. 18:15-20; Ps. 111; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

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KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE

I wonder what you made of the reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Maybe I should be wondering if you made *anything* of it. . .

There are several reasons why we sometimes have trouble listening to Paul. But one big part of the problem is that we read his letters in short snippets, dragged out of context. As a result, it's hard to pick up what he's talking about, much less what he's saying about it. And we preachers are always tempted just to skip the epistle and go on to the gospel reading, which is usually more accessible, though not, for all that, any easier to deal with.

Then, just to make things worse, current liturgical usage winds up the reading with "The Word of the Lord" or some similar acclamation, with a response that suggests that you ought to have gotten something really striking and revelatory and uplifting and edifying out of it. Frankly, I liked the usage of the older Books of Common Prayer on this point better. There, the reader concluded by saying, "Here endeth the Epistle." And we didn't have to respond to that at all, though, under one's breath, I suppose one was always free to mutter "And a good thing, too!"

This morning's snippet from 1 Corinthians is actually just the beginning of a long argument about a topic that hasn't been a big issue for Western Christians for, oh, twelve or thirteen hundred years: the question of eating meat that had been slaughtered in pagan sacrificial worship. It may still be a issue in certain parts of the world. And maybe we, too, will get exercised about it in new ways since we're all living in a more multi-cultural world. But it's probably not been a big question mark for most of us. When *was* the last time you were invited to lunch at the Temple of Asklepias to celebrate a friend's birthday?

But it was a very big issue among the Christians at Corinth, complete with all the mutual accusations and recriminations and sneers and maybe even anathemas that tend to swarm around religious issues. And Paul has decided he has to wade into the middle of it or the whole community may fly apart.

It may seem odd, at this remove, that it could even be a question. If you've ever seen one of those old movies where the Christians get thrown to the lions, you know that they absolutely refused to have anything to do with pagan religion. But that was decades after Paul wrote this passage. By that time, both the Roman government and the Christians had drawn a very clear line.

But in Paul's time, it wasn't that clear. To be sure, devout Jews had had such a prohibition for a long time; and it's not surprising if Jews who were now also Christians assumed that it was still binding—on them and also on any Gentiles who might have become part of the church. It made no *sense* to be a Christian if you were still going to be a polytheist. What would it mean to say that Jesus was the Son of God? Which god? And how would Jesus relate to all the myriad half-brothers and cousins who'd been sired by one god or another? Of *course*, Gentile Christians had to give up polytheistic rites.

The Gentiles, on the other hand, are probably saying, "What? You mean I can't go to Aunt Sophie's birthday party? The whole family goes to Aunt Sophie's birthday party! I might as well just go into exile if I don't show up." Actually, it was a more everyday thing than that, even. Religion was deeply worked into every aspect of family life. Christians couldn't even have eaten an ordinary dinner with their families any more.

Now, Paul's argument about this issue takes up three chapters in this letter, And he begins by agreeing emphatically with . . . the Gentile converts. We know, he says, that idols and their many gods have no actual existence. Accordingly, it can't make any difference whether a person has eaten something that was sacrificed or not. (We heard this bit this morning.)

But he'll end up, in chapter 10, saying to the people he's just agreed with that they ought to give way anyway so that they won't tempt those whose "conscience is weak" (that's his phrase for the conservative faction, the people who are afraid of being polluted by such offerings) to violate their beliefs. In other words, his message is "Back off. You're right, of course, but we need you to step back in order to keep the peace."

It's a problematic solution, isn't it? It gives the "weak" a permanent and absolute veto on anything they don't like. And as tends to happen with people when we get anxious and scrupulous, the weak will probably keep finding more and more things that offend their consciences and are, nonetheless, overwhelmingly tempting for them. And therefore *you* must avoid them.

We've been through this kind of situation far too many times in the last century to think that Paul's solution is harmless. "You're right, of course, but can't you just slow down? Can't you just give the conservatives a little more space so that they can work up a bit more slowly to . . . integration . . . to women on vestries . . . to women in the priesthood . . . to lesbians and gays in the church . . . to equality in marriage?" Well, no.

We can't and don't follow Paul here in terms of his specific proposal. Of course, in fairness to him, he thought the End of the World was very close; so he wasn't taking the long view. And he lived in an undemocratic world where people in general had no say in determining issues of the community. So he couldn't really imagine a modern democracy where ordinary people like us can actually make things happen. Our church and our era would both be unimaginable for him.

So, even if it's not precisely his fault, I think we have to acknowledge that Paul's practical example here isn't suitable for us. This is true pretty often, actually, in the New Testament letters. Their solutions, good or bad for their own era, are often bad for ours because they were meant for quite different worlds. And whatever we mean by calling our readings "The Word of the Lord," we don't mean (and the vast majority of Episcopalians have *never* meant) that every word in the Bible is to be taken as a direct rule of law or church

life. (In fact, we had quite a long struggle with the Puritans over that very point.)

But . . . there's still something really important in Paul's argument. It's not the practical directives. What's important is the *principle* of life that he lays down: "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 God."

Let's get serious here! Would you rather be right or would you rather be in love? Being right is a pretty dry substitute for being loved. And it doesn't do either us or our neighbor much good.

Paul isn't dismissing theology or the whole business of critical thinking. He could do a fabulous job of it when he put his mind to it. He's just saying it has its limits and its dangers. Its danger is that we get drunk on it and arrogant toward our ignorant neighbor. Its limit is that it doesn't have even the faintest notion of how to build up a life together in community.

You may have a few people in mind who need to be reminded of this. They're probably not here. They're probably a lot more conservative than we are. They're probably the sort of people Paul would have described as having a weak conscience and wanting to impose it on others.

We're on the other side. Like Paul, we are liberals—radicals even. Oh yes, never imagine that he was a conservative. He had broken so many rules that his head must have been spinning at times.

But notice that we're the sort of people he's addressing! "Knowledge puffs up"—like a toad, long the icon of self-satisfaction. That's a danger we're always flirting with because . . . we know we're right. And, you know, I think we are.

But it takes something more than that to build a community, to nourish a community, to renew and sustain a community. It takes love. The central thing isn't what we know. The central thing is that we are loved by God and are learning to love God. And the love of

the church flows out of that. We learn to love one another, even the people who tiresomely persist in getting certain things wrong.

We aren't going to give them a veto, as Paul seems to recommend. But we don't need to beat up on them, either. What we need to do is to be in love and to live in love. And then, as Paul says, we may not know much, but God knows us. What else do we need?