

Today's Scripture passage is one of those that can seem strange to us because it deals with a specific issue that most of us in North America don't encounter, namely eating meat sacrificed to idols, other gods. And yet, the principal underneath this discussion could not be more timely or applicable to our modern daily lives, and maybe especially to the world we are living in right now.

In the Apostle Paul's day, the specific problem was that there were a lot of people in his churches that were very new to Christianity and the whole idea of one God who is to be worshiped alone. The culture they still lived in considered worshiping many gods not only normal but the thing to do for the good of the nation and their local community. This was completely woven into daily life for most people.

The historical theologian, NT Wright talks about a restaurant in Rome. It is "built around the ruins of an old temple. Two of the pillars are still visible. The restaurant makes a feature of them, and is proud of the ancient origins of the building where they now serve excellent pasta, great local cuisine, and fine Italian wines.

"But what people don't normally realize is that in the ancient world the temples normally *were* the restaurants. Each town or city had plenty of shrines to local gods and goddesses, to the great divinities like Apollo or Venus, and in Paul's day, more and more to the Roman emperor and members of his family. And what people mostly did there was to come with animals for sacrifice. When the animal was killed, it would be cooked, and the family (depending on what sort of ritual it was) might have a meal with the meat as the [centerpiece]. But there was usually more meat than the worshippers could eat, and so other people would come to the temple and share in the food which had been offered to the god.

"Even that would often fail to use up all the sacrificed meat. So the temple officials would take what was left to the market where it would be sold in the normal way. In fact, most of the meat available for sale in a city like Corinth would have been offered in sacrifice." (NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pg 98)

"The problem [Paul's] facing is that several of the Christians in Corinth before their conversion (which was after all quite recent), had been regular worshippers in the shrines of the idols. They knew what went on there -- the dark sense of mystery and fear, the sense that in feasting at the god's table, The sense of casting off moral restraint, the [people] waiting round the back to do whatever you wanted in return for a little extra payment to the god ... And once you had shared in that dark but powerful world on a regular basis, perhaps for many years, it would be difficult, in your memory and imagination, to separate part of it from the whole thing. Now that you had become a Christian you would feel you had been rescued from the world of darkness and brought out into the light. True worship wasn't like that; truly human living wasn't like that. You had escaped. You were free." (pg 104)

The difficulty would be separating the different parts of the experience. You've been told that part of it is meaningless, but it might be easy to be drawn back in to the whole thing. Better to stay completely away. Then, you see other people from your church going to your old temple. Can we say "confusing"?

Now, let's hear what Paul has to say about this from **1 Corinthians 8:1-13**. I will be reading from *The VOICE* translation. Hear the word of the Lord!

[Paul writes] 8:1 As to the concern of eating food dedicated to idols: we know that all of us have knowledge, *but knowledge can be risky*. Knowledge promotes *overconfidence and worse* arrogance, but *charity of the heart* (love, that is) looks to build up *others*. 2 Just because a person presumes to have some bit of knowledge, that person doesn't necessarily have the right kind of knowledge. 3 But if someone loves God, *it is certain that* God has already known that one.

4 So to address your concerns about eating food offered to idols, let me start with what we know. An idol is essentially nothing, as there is no other God but the One. 5 And even if *the majority believes* there are many so-called gods in heaven and on earth (certainly many *worship* such "gods" and "lords"), *this is not our view*. 6 For us, there is one God, the Father who is the ultimate source of all things and the goal of our lives. And there is one Lord—Jesus the Anointed, *the Liberating King*; through Him all things *were created*, and by Him we are *redeemed*.

7 But this knowledge is not in everyone. Up until now, some have been so familiar with idols *and what goes on in the temples* that when they eat meat that has been offered first to some idol, their weak consciences are polluted. *This is the issue*. 8 *Again, here's what we know*: what we eat will not bring us closer to God—we gain nothing in feasting and lose nothing by fasting. 9 Now let me warn you: don't let your newfound liberty cause those who don't know this to fall face-first. 10 Let's say a person (*someone who knows of Jesus*) sees you eating in the temple of an idol; and because the person with a weaker conscience is still unsure of things, he becomes confident, follows your lead, and eats idol food. 11 Now, because of your knowledge *on display in your conduct*, the weaker brother or sister—for whom the Anointed One died—is destroyed! Ruined! 12 What's more, *by living according to your knowledge*, you have sinned against these brothers and sisters and wounded their weak consciences—and because you sinned against them, you have sinned against the Anointed One, *the Liberating King*.

13 So if any type of food is an issue that causes my brothers and sisters to fall away *from God*, then God forbid I should ever eat it again so that I would never be *the crack, the rise, or the rock on the road* that causes them to stumble.

The word of Life.

Thanks be to God!

One of the hallmarks of Methodists is something that is referred to in churchy jargon as "personal piety" or trying to live a holy life. That can sound like something that's not really a fun way to live. The goal is that as followers of Jesus Christ that we try to live as close to his teachings as we can. Jesus refers to this as abundant life. From the time that Charles Wesley wrote to his brother John for advice about how Charles and his friends as Oxford should be living their lives as faithful Christians, this has been a part of Methodism.

The point was not to have a laundry list of things to do or not do to keep people from having fun or a fulfilling life full of burdensome duties, quite the contrary. It was to free people from the wicked and evil things of the world and demonstrate God's love for the world. It was intended to be freeing and inspiring to care for and show

deference to our neighbors. It was to demonstrate how seriously they took the love of God that they wanted to follow as closely as they could. Love God and love neighbor.

Sometimes, people take that too far. It could be in either direction. It could be "We're free in Christ, so we can do whatever we want," or "Everybody needs to live out following Jesus the way that *I think* is best." Both are full of over confidence and arrogance, and both forget what Paul says is the most important thing, considering what is best for the spiritual health of the people around us.

I heard a story about a church with a very unique picture Jesus. The image itself was translucent, but it had a lightbulb behind it. So, the image glowed and almost had a lifelike appearance. I picture it like a Thomas Kinkade painting that almost looks backlit as it glows and looks so full of life. Naturally, as this church would be closing up after a service or meetings, they'd have to turn out the lights. And often someone would say, "Don't forget to turn off Jesus." What?! As you can imagine some people were appalled. *Turn off Jesus? How can you suggest such a thing?* Eventually, the church removed the picture despite the objections of the people who loved it. "Was that an act of Christian freedom or love? Did it build up or tear down the church community?" (Doug Bratt, Center for Excellence in Preaching, "1 Corinthians 8:1-13") Was it that some people were merely offended, or was their faith injured? Think about it. I don't really have an answer, but it's a way to examine our own lives.



One thing in Protestant churches, including the Methodist church, has to do with drinking alcohol. The Bible doesn't prohibit drinking. In some places it suggests it as a good thing. It does frown on drunkenness. I'm not going to get into all of the pros and cons about that, but I am going to talk about how we use grape juice for communion. Jesus used wine at the Last Supper, and the Church universally followed suit for almost 2000 years. Once a process had been discovered to stop grape juice from turning into vinegar, Methodists and some other Protestant denominations decided to give up their right to use wine for communion to allow people to avoid alcohol.

Our old friend, Sharon Sherlock, as a recovering alcoholic, appreciated that we used a non-alcoholic beverage for communion. One Sunday, she didn't come up to take communion, the bread and the juice, symbolizing the body and blood, the life, that Jesus sacrificed for us. When I asked her why, she said she heard me use the word "wine," and she didn't want to take the risk. Naturally, after that I was especially careful, not to use that word. This is not true for all, but several recovering alcoholics have told me that just the smell of alcohol in wine is enough to tempt them to return to drinking. I'll happily give up my "right" to have wine when it makes that kind of difference to someone else's life. It's important to consider that what may be harmless to us, may destroy another person's life, spiritually or physically.

Today, there are issues that deeply divide people in the United States. Even in the church, there are people on different sides of things, and they are absolutely certain that they are correct. Of course, when something is

plainly right, it is wrong to avoid it just because some don't approve. However, when there are others who think differently, how do we come to a resolution?

In Paul's time, one of the debates was whether it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols, to other gods, but he knew that the point itself was not significant. It was the relationship among the people, the love that they showed one another through their consideration for their spiritual health and what they did. He recognized that the people who "knew" that they were theologically correct and could eat the meat would be tempted to look down on the ones that didn't think it was right. We have to watch out that we don't fall into the same trap.

Doug Bratt tells a story about a holiday family get together, one that illustrates why they can be difficult. His cousin, Barry, *formally* educated with a PhD, decided to make a condescending remark about another cousin. Jake was *informally* educated through life experience and worked as a "refuse hauler." Barry's so called knowledge made him so arrogant that Jake decided that he never needed to come to another family holiday party.

Our call as disciples is to build each other up and remember there are others for whom Jesus graciously lived, died and rose again from the dead, too. I loved this phrase I came across, "Those who are strong [should] concern ourselves not just with cultivating our own little spiritual gardens, but also do all we can to help others' flourish as well." (Bratt)

So, this week I have a challenge for you. Consider, meditate, and pray. How what you do might be affecting others in their faith journey with Jesus? Consider whether what you're doing helps or unintentionally harms. In the places that help, celebrate that. The Good News is that if you identify some areas that may be less helpful, you can figure out how *your* call can support and *encourage* the call of God *to others*. Because that is one of the ways that we live it out. The Call of God.

Amen!