



EPHIPHANY IV SERMON

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Things in Corinth were pretty much a mess, and reading through St. Paul's so-called 'first letter' to the church there provides a laundry list of issues that young community of faith was facing twenty years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Corinth was a bustling port city in what is now southern Greece. There were lots of cultures and religions represented there, lots of commerce, and lots of sailors. Paul's letter deals with issues brought to him in previous letters and in person by those he describes as "Chloe's people." It is a bewildering assortment of human stumbling and mishap: there were squabbles over who's smarter and who's got the better spiritual gifts; Paul deals with the misuse of wealth and power, prostitution, inter-religious marriage, the place of women in church and society, slavery, lawsuits against church members, and he even writes about those who get drunk at communion.

Many of them are issues that continue to this day (although those tiny glasses preclude the drunkenness!) But you may be thinking that today's second reading has little to do with us Lutherans in Reading in 2012. It is, as you heard, about meat sacrificed to idols, and Paul takes three whole chapters to deal with it, more space than with any other problem. He spends so much time with it because in many ways it gets at the heart of what's troubling Paul and dividing the church in old Corinth.

Let's dig a little deeper! I mentioned that Corinth was multicultural and religious. Temples of various sorts were everywhere, each devoted to its own god (or idol, as Paul calls them). And in each temple animals were sacrificed as offerings to those gods. That meant there was a surplus of good, cheap barbecue all over town! One writer suggest that, in a place like Corinth, most, if not all, of the available meat would have been offered first as sacrifice, then

sent to market. (Why just slaughter a cow or goat, if you could please some god in the process?!)

The problem for Christians was whether or not they should eat such food. For Jewish Christians, there was less debate. Stay away from the stuff because it's not kosher. But for Gentile Christians, not subject to kosher regs, it was more complicated. Did the sacrifice taint the meat in any way??? If I ate meat offered to Osiris, for example, was that a sign of my devotion to him? (In some ways, it might be like a drug dealer visiting me at the office and saying, "Key, I really like your steeple. Here's some money to help take care of it." Do I say, "No thanks. That's bad money." Or do I take it and use it, or give it away, or shred it!?)

Or, since I know those gods don't really exist, does it even matter?

But, really, the issues goes even deeper than that. You see, the issue of meat offered to idols was dividing the church. There were some more sophisticated members who, like Paul, realized that idols weren't really gods and had no power. They were false/empty, so it's OK to eat the meat. They even went around with bumper stickers on their carts. Paul lists the slogans: "We possess the knowledge!" "No idols really exist." "There is only one God."

We could imagine them scoffing at the 'poor things' who were bent out of shape over the matter, those who were superstitious enough or uneducated, who saw the meat as something to be afraid of or, at least, to avoid. And here's where it gets interesting, I think, as Paul shows some remarkable sensitivity.

He writes to the leaders: "Take care that your freedom does not damage your weaker brothers and sisters." True, you've not bound to the kosher laws; you know those gods are mere idols. But, understand that your eating the meat could hurt someone else's faith. Paul says he'd rather be a vegetarian than cause someone else to stumble. In other words, don't make the issue—'right' or 'wrong'—more important than the relationship between believers. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," he declares.

Building up the body of Christ is at the heart of all these issues: spiritual gifts, the use of wealth and power, gender, lawsuits, and even drunkenness at communion. (It was about the 'haves' and 'have-nots'; some had too much food and drink while others at table went hungry.) "In Christ we have been set free," Paul insists, free from bondage to sin, free from the power of

death. But we need to be very careful that that new-found freedom doesn't make us slaves to self. (Like a freshman college student who discovers that binge-drinking is not so freeing after all, especially not the next morning!)

Paul spends three full chapters on this food issue because he wants us to wrestle with what our freedom in Christ means for others. That freedom is never an excuse for individualism. I remember my sassy retort as a kid: "It's a free country!" I found out—the hard way!—that does not mean I could do whatever I wanted!

Freedom in Christ is always given by God for the sake of the whole. More than freedom from, it is freedom for others, because it is freedom grounded in love. So Martin Luther writes in his treatise Freedom of the Christian: "A Christian is perfectly free lord of all and subject to none." Some see this declaration as the end of the Middle Ages, challenging serfdom and absolute monarchies. But that's only half of what Luther wrote. Tied to that declaration of freedom is this admission: "At the same time he is dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

We have only to look to Jesus to see where Luther gets that paradox. We heard in today's gospel that Jesus had authority over the demons. He has the power to still storms, change water to wine, restore the blind, deaf and crippled, and even to raise the dead. But he uses none of that power for the sake of himself, to 'puff up,' in Paul's words.

Quite the contrary, his power and authority are manifestations of God's love: to heal, to calm, to give joy and life, to build up God's people on earth. So Jesus eats with sinners, welcomes outcasts, touches the unclean, washes dirty feet. Lord of all, he becomes servant of all, and calls us to follow.

That is always a challenge for us, of course, as it was a challenge for him. I suspect that in these coming months, we'll be hearing a great deal about 'freedom' from our political candidates. (Recent debates have been full of it!) I'm asking that you listen carefully with the ears of Christ's body. Ask if that 'freedom' is about the individual over against the rest, dividing the body. Is it about the self, puffing up and so hurting the weak? Or is it rather freedom, rooted in love, building up as it cares for the fragile and vulnerable among us?

We face some of the same challenges in the church, of course. I returned from Chicago a week ago, asked to serve on a ten-member panel to study how the church deals with social

issues. (I'll be inviting you to participate in a survey later this year!) The study was ordered because of the 'fallout' relating to our 2009 social statement on human sexuality. As you know, a number of people and congregations have used its adoption as reason for dividing the body of Christ. (You may have read about the Boyertown splinter group in last week's paper.)

The statement, intended as beacon of light, has rather become a lightning rod, for some the cause of celebration, justice, inclusion; for others the pain of alienation, unfaithfulness and despair. The body of the ELCA is hurting—some would say bleeding—because of it. We've got to find a better way for the church to deal with these really important matters, a way that is inclusive and upbuilding, rather than creating a contest with ultimate 'winners' and 'losers.'

The issues of old Corinth are very much a part of our day, for sure. And the challenge for all of us, in faith and politics I think, is to be faithful in such a way as to build bridges rather than walls, to build up rather than diminish, to be devoted less to self—which always leads to 'us and them'—and more to the mission of God's love in Christ, working with Jesus for the redemption of this hurting, desperate, dying world.

We've got a good start at Old Trinity, I believe. I honestly don't know of a more open, welcoming and accepting congregation. We are a 'Reconciling in Christ' church, praise God! We have a Deaf community of faith as a part of us. The church building is completely accessible. We regularly welcome friends who are in the mental health system, homeless folks from the Hope Rescue Mission, residents of the New Person Center; we serve kids from 'at risk' environments and immigrants who seek a better life; our worship broadcasts reach quite literally around the world.

I hope you join me in seeing these as evidence of God's kingdom breaking in, opening doors and building bridges, ways by which the body of Christ flexes and stretches its muscles—building up and making whole to the glory of God for the blessing of God's people. It is such a joy and privilege to share this life together. Thanks be to God! *Amen.*