

February 1, 2009

Epiphany 4

"Love Is Not Destructive"

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But the man who loves God is known by God. ⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. ⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), ⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. ⁷ But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. ⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

A new bride decides to surprise her husband with her first apple pie. The pie is still warm when she adds a scoop of ice cream. He puts it into his mouth, and to his surprise it is not nearly as good as the apple pie his mother used to bake. She asks him how he likes the pie, and he says, "Honey it is great!" How unloving it would be for him to be totally honest with her and say, "It is good, but it is not nearly as good as my mother made." Under certain circumstances total honesty can be a form of cruelty.

The Christians living in Corinth had a problem showing love to each other. That is why Paul had to encourage them with these famous words in 1 Corinthians 13, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." He also told them they should think of themselves as the body of Christ with all the members working together in love to support and encourage each other with the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit poured out on them.

A real test of love came when tensions arose between those who ate meat that had been associated with animal sacrifices in pagan temples and those who said such meat could not be eaten. Remember the days when Santa Maria had numerous vendors selling Santa Maria style barbecues. That was how it was in ancient Corinth. Meat left over from animal sacrifices was barbecued and sold near the pagan temples. Some said that they felt perfectly comfortable eating such meat because idols were nothing compared to the blessings they had in Jesus. Others said that to eat such meat was compromising the

Christian faith. In times of controversy and tension Christian love does not say, "How can I tear the other person down and get my way?" Christian love says, "How can I build the other people up and strengthen them?"

Knowledge puffs up

When you think you have a better way to live your life in Christ, it is not always easy to be patient with other people who do not measure up to your standards. Here is what Paul said about this superior knowledge. "Now about food offered to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." There is a saying that "knowledge is power." The more you know the more power you have over other people. Even Christians who know more about the Bible may want to exercise their power and authority over other Christians. The same is also true about Christians who are confident of their relationship to Jesus Christ and the freedom they have in him. They may have little patience or love for those who don't have the same level of knowledge.

Actually, the more you know in life, the more you realize you don't know everything there is to know. You have heard it said, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." This is true because the person who knows little really doesn't know how little he knows. Paul writes, "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God." The Christians in Corinth who thought they had it all figured out when it came to eating meat offered to idols failed in the most important category of showing love to God and to their fellow Christians.

Let's get back to this problem of eating food offered to idols? Could a Christian enjoy this food in good conscience without compromising what they believed? Sure they could because they looked at idols as being nothing compared to what they had in Christ. "So then about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and there is no God but on." Paul says, "We know." We have knowledge, superior knowledge of the true God. We know there are many gods, but there is only one true God from whom all things came. Notice how Paul also emphasized that Jesus is the same, one true God with the words, "And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." What an amazing verse this is to prove Jesus is equal to his heavenly Father.

In the prophet Isaiah there is a section where the Lord points out how foolish people are to carefully build idols of wood and gold, but then nail them to the floor of their temple to keep them from falling over if there should be an earthquake. The Christians in Corinth could also eat meat offered to idols confidently saying to themselves as they ate: "I can eat these juicy, tender barbecued beef that was part of the temple worship, because those idols are nothing. Every bite, every chew, every swallow was a way of saying, 'Idols are nothing. I have the true God, my heavenly Father who is mine through Jesus his Son.'"

With this confidence that idols are nothing comes the danger of being puffed up and proud that we are not as foolish as the idolaters. Several years ago, I pulled up behind a truck with the bumper sticker that read, "The one with the most toys in the end wins." How do you feel when you read a bumper sticker that promotes material possessions in an idolatrous way? You feel great that you have not lowered yourself to such a position that

you your toys are more important than the Lord? You are thankful that you know the true God. Be honest. At the same time you struggle to not be so puffed up and proud that you think you are superior to other people who don't have the same confidence the Lord that you have. When we confess our sins before God, it includes all these uncharitable and unloving thoughts, this puffed up pride and superiority. It includes this "I know more than you know attitude" that pervades our lives. Not a day goes by when we do not need Jesus blood to cleanse us from these sins and make us fit for the kingdom he has prepared for us.

It has been said that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Let me repeat this again. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Love builds up

Listen to what Paul writes about demonstrating love to people who may be weaker in their faith and understanding of things. "But not everyone knows this. Some people are so accustomed to idols when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled." Some of the Christians in Corinth could not even get near a pagan temple, or smell a BBQ without getting sick in their stomach. Immediately they would think of the days they were bringing their animals to the temple, and teaching their children about the false gods. They wanted nothing to remind them of their former way of life. Whether you feel totally free in Christ, or whether you are overly sensitive in the conscience, these feelings or emotions do not bring you closer to God. Both Christian groups were free to determine whether to eat such meat or not to eat it.

I am holding in my hand a violin to illustrate a story about a man who once made his living by playing a fiddle in bars. He was good at getting people into a party mode with the music he played. With his music the people in the bar drank more and danced more, and even became looser in their morals. Then he became a Christian. His friends in church wanted him to play the violin for worship and lead the choir, but he refused. He could not pick up the violin without thinking of those days of playing in bars, drinking too much and being immoral. Christians who are strong in their faith might argue he should have used his talents for the glory of God and enjoy his changed life by playing music to the glory of God. He could not overcome what Paul called, "a weak conscience."

How do we treat such people who are overly sensitive? Do we brush them off or ignore them? No, listen to what Paul says to Christians of every age.

"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?" The person who is weak might sin against his conscience, or even worse lapse back into the worship of idols.

Let's draw a comparison to how Christians use alcohol. The Bible tells us that wine gladdens the heart of man. Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding of Cana in Galilee. Some

Christians prefer to not drink anything because of problems with too much alcohol in the past, or family problems, or just the fear of getting out of control. A Christian who knows the freedom of enjoying wine as a gift from God, in moderation of course, will not invite another Christian to his home and serve a glass of wine, just to force the issue of freedom. This could lead a person to violate his conscience or even worse get involved in drinking too much. Or take the sensitive subject of worship. In one congregation half the people want to be led in worship by a full pipe organ, and the other half want to be led by a praise band. Both groups will try to understand how strongly the other group feels about their way of worship.

This afternoon a man by the name of Ben Rothlisberger will be playing quarterback for the Pittsburg Steelers. In the summer of 2006 he nearly died when he was riding his motorcycle without a helmet which was legal in Pittsburg. Before the accident he was asked why he would ride without a helmet. He told reporters it was because of the freedom you feel riding without a helmet. After the accident he said he would always wear a helmet because of the responsibility he felt to other people who loved him and to his team members.

We have so much freedom in Christ. We know that every sin of our past life has been forgiven. We know idols are nothing. We actually believe the body and blood of Jesus are received with bread and wine in Holy Communion. This freedom moves us to want to build other people up in love, and not destroy them, especially when they are weak. Amen.