

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Loving God, we worship you because you are love. You are all that is validating; you take us at our weakest and help shape us into our strongest. Your Gospel empowers us to be the people that can affect each other with your goodness and strength. Despite our best intentions, we find ourselves falling short of where we want to be and how we want to grow. We are, at the same time, so blessed and so broken, but you are there in the midst of the struggle. You are there to affirm us in our goodness and to hold us in our brokenness. You tell us that we are nothing less than the blessed and beautiful people you created us to be while affirming and nudging us to grow into more and better along the way. Hear our prayers this morning and mold us into your faithful people, loving God.

This morning, God, we hear the words of scripture and stand somewhat confused. We hear a message that was meant for another time with other concerns, but, nevertheless, God, there is a message for us to hear this morning to take with us all our days. We are your people, whether we are Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, or otherwise. We are your people whether we believe in the smallest piece of doctrine or not, because we declare you as Lord, which equalizes all things. Help us, God, to be united as one people and to share the truth only in love, no matter our perspective. We pray all these things in the name of the One Lord, the One Savior, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one...

SERMON

OK, while I'm doing this, your job is to look around and see how this survey goes. OK, by show of hands, how many of you are cheering for the Seahawks this evening? OK, how many of you are cheering for the Patriots? OK, how many of you are cheering for Downton Abbey? And how many of you don't really give a care? OK, now I want you to

find someone who does not share your opinion. Go and try to convince that person that what you believe is the correct way, and then we'll report back in a moment. Sound good? OK, give it a shot.

How did that go? Let me hear some responses. Did you convince those around you that you were right and they were wrong? Show of hands, who succeeded? Is it any surprise that none of us really found success in coming to someone with a speech and telling them how wrong they are, and then going off on our merry way? Let me ask you, when you were being spoken to, how did you feel? Belittled? Judged? Indeed, when it comes down to it, it's doesn't matter who is right. It doesn't matter what knowledge we have that makes us superior to the next person or that we do things the right way. What matters is that if we want to share a message whether it be about football or Downton Abbey, or the most important factors of living the Christian life, we have to do it the right way, which is the loving way, or the message gets lost in belittlement and judgment.

The book of 1 Corinthians is, like all of Paul's writings, a letter. Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthian church explaining how to best live faithfully in light of this new, growing faith. They weren't even called Christians yet, but the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ meant that living in this world was much, much different than it had been. Things that were once of utmost importance now could mean nothing. Grace had new meaning. This chapter of 1 Corinthians 8 is one of those places where Paul had to cast new light on an old issue because of the work and person of this Jesus. He speaks of meat offered to idols. But, let's be honest, this doesn't mean much to us today. This is one of those places we have to specifically translate an idea from the context of first century Corinth to our own present day context. After all, we are very clear on how important the idea of food

sacrificed to idols is to our world, right? Sacrificing and how we address those sacrifices are questions for a bygone age, but the principles behind how those people were called to relate to those who struggled with such questions is quite relevant. Let us look back at Paul's teaching and, knowing how it doesn't relate to us, look deeper to see how this passage is just as timely as it was two thousand years ago. That is through Christian Freedom and what we do with that freedom, making it either blessed or selfish.

There's a lot of talk about meat sacrificed to idols. The point, though, is not on the details around that. Paul starts this passage with a commentary on knowledge and love. It foreshadows the later bedrock of 1 Corinthians 13, subordinating all knowledge to love. Love is patient, love is kind, he says there, and everything, everything is secondary to a life of love. Knowledge puffs up, he says, but love builds up. In other words, we aren't just called to have correct knowledge. Knowledge is important, but if it is not undergirded with love, then it becomes a tool, something to be used harshly. As he says, it "puffs up;" knowledge by itself makes us feel bigger and more important, but the Christian life is not about feeling bigger and more important. That is what leads into his discussion of food perceived sacrificed to idols. To Christians, it is uncomplicated how we should live. Meat is meat is meat. Just by being cooked, it may be perceived to be sacrificed to idols by others, but doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if we eat or if we do not eat morally. Food by itself is morally neutral. In that age, there were many idols, but there's a greater truth. Paul responds with the underlying message of it all: "there is no God but one." That invalidates all those concerns, for God is the power behind it all.

So, we know what we should do, but the point of this passage is not a teaching on meat offered to idols. All of that stuff we said before, these are taken as a given to those

reading the letter. The point of this passage is not in faithful teaching of what we as individuals should or should not do with the meat. It's about the perceptions. The underlying message is a teaching on how to use our God-given Christian freedom. Christ lived, Christ died, Christ rose again that we might shake off the shackles of sinfulness and live into a new life of freedom and service. It is freedom and grace, but it is also freedom and responsibility. One of the struggles I have with today's world is how we use...or misuse the concept of freedom. It has lost its original meaning; it has become a cheap excuse for bad behavior. It has become so individualized and self-serving. It's not about what I should do; it's what I can do and what I wanna do. When it comes to our Christian freedom, it can become easily the same thing. I don't care about so and so or so and so, just as long as I'm doing the right thing by Jesus is what matters. But that dismisses the foundational piece of what Jesus came to teach: we are one community, one Body in the spirit of Jesus Christ. We were made for each other, and we were made to serve each other. Freedom is instead an empowerment to bring empower new life and freedom for the other. Therein lies the power of the passage.

Paul dismisses all self-centered motives with an important point: we can misuse our God-given Christian freedom, and when we do, we sin against Christ. "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Paul says that if those who see you eating meat that they think might have been offered to an idol, it might damage their faith. And so, Paul takes the high road in his freedom. It's not about what he can do for himself; it is about what he can do for those who need guidance, who need structure, who need training: "If food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." Yes, they can eat the meat. Yes, it's in their

power to do so. No, they don't realize this new freedom, but it's not about telling them what's what. It's not about what I want and what I can do; it's about what I can do will benefit the other person where they are in their faith right now. That is sacrificing of one's self that the other may prosper and grow. That is not efficient, but that is Christian maturity in action.

Thinking about how this passage works, you might think that it would be best if those who know more would go to those who are bothered by this meat offered to idols and correct their thinking. It would be the most efficient, but it's not necessarily how we teach or how we learn the best. As Paul says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." We say it over and over, because it means a lot. Think about this, for instance. How do you like it when someone who has a higher degree than you, more experience, or someone who just as a strong opinion comes to you and starts telling you what to do and what to think? It feels off-putting, and it should. We mentioned that earlier when we started this sermon with that survey. As we described, that is not love in action, because we are not being honored for where and who we are in our thoughts and feelings. We are being pushed toward something we may not be ready to accept, no matter whether we think it is right or not. When we are treated with love, we can learn new things, but we aren't being told them and told to accept them. They are offered to us to accept when we are ready or not.

In today's world, you can find a different brand of Christian everywhere. We are not Christianity; we are Christianities, for there are many. Each branch of Christian practice, each denomination, each brick and mortar church has its root in some time and some conflict. Sometimes what separates us is the smallest, ittiest piece of doctrine whose relevance has gotten lost in the sands of time. Sometimes those can mean the absolute

world to a group of people. Some people think that infant baptism is a teaching of the devil. Some think that you aren't baptized unless you are fully immersed. Some think that the Communion table must be protected, and that you cannot partake unless you are a full member of the church. Some think that God's grace is available but to a few people.

Ya know what? I don't care, and we shouldn't care. I don't care if you believe something different about the Christian story than I do because, in the final analysis, it doesn't matter. Our calling is to lift others up, whether or not they believe the same things or think the same way. It is to move toward maturity. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Frankly, I'm bothered by the amount of Christian exclusion based on just a few principles. Doctrine is meant to emphasize and expand how we best practice faithfulness, but not to keep others out. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Whether you are Baptist, or Presbyterian, or XYZ denomination, it doesn't matter. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. You aren't going to reach the pearly gates one day and find that God is only allowing Baptists; the rest need not apply. That's not love, and that's not grace. What matters is how we treat and react to others. If it is with suspicion and judgment, then we aren't honoring that they are also faithful seekers of the Lord Jesus Christ. They just got there a different way.

This is going to be one of the most divided days in America outside of your regular election cycles. Super Bowl Sunday is the day when you find a lot of people agreeing with you and disagreeing with you. But when it comes down to it, it's an opinion, not another's self worth. You might say, it's not the meat; it's how you eat it. That was the message for that time. Today, the message is similar. I would say, it's not the meat; it's how you cook it. In other words, it's not the knowledge itself; it's how you prepare it and how you deliver it.

We don't by any knowledge bring down others who do not necessarily share or understand that knowledge. It's not what separates us. It's not those little pieces of doctrine or the large pieces that make us Christian or less than Christian. It's not about the doctrine or how we interpret the doctrine; it's how we respond to it. Those who are still learning what this is all about, those with, as Paul put it "weak consciences" will take note of how those with experience will lead. No matter what opinions or doctrines we share or do not share, let us always remember that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.