

"MUTUAL BONDS"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany ~ February 1, 2015

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

You people are something else. You people are something special. You people are the people of God. I know this because I've seen God work through you. I know this because I've watched you respond to the movement of God's Spirit. I know this because I've received Christ's love through you. You people are the people of God. You people are the Body of Christ. You people are the church!

"Church" - now there's a word that's been thrown around to apply to a wide variety of human organizations. For some people the word lights up their eyes and makes their heart beat faster. For others the word fills their eyes with tears or makes their blood pressure go up. But for most, the word "church" brings no reaction at all, except maybe a yawn. When a person decides to join our church, I invite you to enter a covenant with him or her "to be" the church together in this place. But what does that covenant mean? A covenant is a mutual bond ... a contract of shared expectations ... a collection of reciprocal promises and obligations. So what do we promise one another when we enter this covenant to be church?

Paul has some practical advice for us today to guide our thinking. As with most of Paul's theology, his advice to the Corinthians grew out of a concrete problem in the church. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city and center of trade, steeped in Hellenistic culture, with a diverse international population. There were many different religious traditions and most of them were polytheistic ... worshipping various gods and showing loyalty to several at once. The people of Corinth saw no more conflict of interest than we would in being a church member and a Green Bay Packer fan and an employee of the state and active with the Masons. Like most Hellenistic cities, Corinth had several temples honoring different deities, and worshippers made animal sacrifices to these gods. After the rituals ended ... after the priests barbecued their share ... the excess meat was sold to help fund temple expenses. For the Jews, of course, such food was never kosher. It was mystically associated with the gods, and I imagine the temple butcher shops advertised it that way.

The Christians in Corinth had left these practices behind - not only the rituals, but the spiritual, ethical, and moral - or immoral - universe of these Hellenistic idols. For some, eating food offered to idols felt like a step back into their old way of life. At best it was a temptation. At worst they imagined it a kind of communion with the idol, putting themselves back under the power of those evil spirits. So they avoided it. But some of the mature Christians knew better. They knew that those gods did not actually exist ... that idols were stone symbols signifying nothing ... so no magical powers adhered to meat offered to imaginary gods. Thus, they could eat with a clear conscience. It was a mature and logical theological argument.

But when they brought hamburger hot dish made from the meat sacrificed to the idols to the church potluck, some people were offended. But the Idol Brand hot dish bringers just rolled their eyes and shook their heads. They said, "We know better." They said, "Idols don't really exist." They said, "There is only one God." They said, "Food has nothing to do with faith. Food will not bring us closer to God." And sadly, with a sneer and a snide tone they looked down on those they had offended as ignorant and stupid and weak. They even enjoyed offending the prudes. They believed in a radical individual freedom which allowed them to define their own personal theology and ethic regardless of the opinions of others. And they exercised their individual freedom on a number of different issues so well that the church at Corinth had fractured into groups over different issues ... and each faction considered themselves smarter and more spiritual than all the rest. Then, like wrangling children, they turned to Papa Paul to settle the matter (though some turned to Papa Cephas or Papa Apollos instead, choosing their authority according to which would give them the answer they wanted). Every child knows which parent is easiest, depending on the request.

They wrote Paul a letter. And he wrote back with an answer that probably didn't please any of them. Some people at Corinth imaged the church on the assumption that there is only one truth, and we must all agree with it ... that there is only one true ethic that everyone must follow ... and that is the one we define because we are the smart and good and true disciples of Jesus and you (whoever "you" are) are not. They believed that the church should decide what is right for everybody and than make everybody conform to it. Naturally, they were in each other's business all the time.

There were others who imaged the church as a place where every individual was free to decide for him – or herself. They believed that the Spirit would lead each individual to find his or her bliss without the interference or influence of others. They weren't in your business, but they also didn't care how their behavior might affect you. They were the “what-I-do-is-nobody-else's-business, stop-meddling, stay-out-of-my-way group.” But in his answer to this strange question about eating meat offered to an idol, the apostle gives us a vision of the church which is both free and obedient. Turns out Paul agreed with both and differed from both sides.

First of all, Paul agreed with the offended side that being a Christian is a distinct identity separate from the mainstream values of the surrounding culture ... and also that we have to consider how our behavior reflects the one whose name we carry. The people of God are something else. The people of God are something special. We answer to a higher standard than just individual freedom. We follow a different ethic than "Leave me alone, I'll do whatever I please." There are some idolatries about our own popular culture which we must together reject and even actively resist, such as faith in violence, faith in technology, faith in wealth, faith solely in ourselves.

On the other hand, Paul agreed with the offenders "no foul, no fault" argument about meat offered to idols. He even quoted them with agreement: "all of us possess knowledge" (v. 1); "no idol in the world really exists" (v. 4); "there is no God but one" (v. 4).

But Paul also recognized that different levels of maturity exist in the church. In every church there are people whose spirituality is especially fragile ... who lack a mature understanding ... who may be more susceptible to temptation ... who are struggling with inner demons or external challenges. There are always "the strong" and "the weak," but in the church Paul envisions that the strong owe it to the weak to care about them ... to be patient with them ... to nurture them ... and never to disregard them. Not only that, but the boundary between the strong and the weak

can be very fluid. We are all strong at times ... all weak at times ... all vulnerable and needy sooner or later ... all strong enough to give something in support of those whose need is greater than our own. Paul told the callused carnivores of Corinth, you are not as strong as you think. You are not as mature as you think. You are not even as smart as you think. It is one thing to grasp the intellectual concepts of the faith ... it is quite another to understand their implications and put them into personal practice. Real knowledge consists of knowing how ignorant you are. Real knowledge applies itself wisely with consideration for its effect upon others. In short, according to Paul, knowledge is always second to love ... and must always serve the higher aim of the common good.

Sometimes our need to be right leads us to do wrong even when we really are right, if we are too proud ... if we are not loving in the way we use our knowledge or power. Let me give you a sterling example of this that came to pass, in of all places, a girl's high school basketball game in Texas. The score at the final bell was 100 to 0. It was a merciless rout against a school with only 20 girls in its high school. The school specializes in teaching students struggling with "learning differences," such as ADD and dyslexia, and the team had been winless the past four seasons. But here's the kicker, this shameful blowout was perpetrated by a private *Christian* school. The coach was eventually fired for failing to apologize because he felt his girls played with honor and integrity. I failed to see the honor and integrity in this whole affair. Just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should*. We need to remember that on the basketball court and in the legislature and in our country's domestic and foreign policy.

We cannot know God. We cannot comprehend the majesty of God's being. We cannot know all of God's ways. But we can love God and be known by God. Love understands that our words and actions affect each other for better or worse. Love does not intentionally shock or offend or taunt. Love knows better.

Do you remember what Jesus said? *"By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have what for one another?"* What? *"Love."* He didn't say, "By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you are smart. He didn't say, "By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you are always right." He didn't say, "By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you humiliate people in their ignorance." And he didn't say, "By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you are rugged, independent individuals." According to Paul ... according to Christ ... what distinguishes the church ... what we owe one another in our covenant relationship ... is love! It's just as simple and just as complicated as that. The Bible recognizes that we are dependent upon God and interdependent with each other ... that individual freedom becomes a narcissistic isolation if it is not put in service to love in relationship.

The trajectory of our culture today pushes us more and more to be individual, isolated consumers. Our technology and economy make us less available to one another and more and more alone. But God has created us for community. We are none of us complete by ourselves. We can only learn about ourselves and grow in healthy relationship. But community takes hard work. It takes patience. It takes forgiveness. It takes love. Love ... God's love in us ... is what turns a bunch of individual persons into a people ... the people of God.

In this polarized society when we have such different opinions and different ways of being in the world ... in this hyper-individualistic time in which we orbit so quickly and briefly in and out of

each other's paths ... God has made you a community of the Spirit. There are times when we pass each other by. There are times when our demons get the best of us. But in spite of this, God is creating church in this place ... in us ... in you.

What do we mean by the covenant to be church here? What do we promise one another? We promise in the name of Christ to love each other. We covenant to be Christ to one another. We promise ... as God helps us ... when we are strong enough ... as much as we are able ... to embody the love of God in the way we are together. My friends, this is the church. You are the people of God for the Word of God. Thanks be to God! Amen. May we pray?

Loving God,

Thank you for freeing us from the oppression of people who think they know you better than we do. Free us also from the pride of thinking we know you better than they. Thank you for gathering us to be your church and making us your people. Thank you for freeing us to the humble obedience and mutual submission of love. Lead us to love one another in ways that will lead us to rejoice ... that will create a cocoon of compassion which surrounds each soul who enters our circle with your healing power ... that will reveal your love to a lonely world in the name of Christ. Amen.