

*Helping Them Grow in Faith*

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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I had had the conversation any number of times before, but that did not make it any less sad or any less frustrating. Debbie and her husband were very active church members – she an elder, he moderator of the deacons. Their only child, a daughter, was home from college, but flatly refused to come to church with them – again. Sadly Debbie told me that she didn't understand it. After all, she and her husband always came to church when they were not working. Surely their daughter knew how much it mattered to them. Knowing that young people often wander from church during those college years, I asked if their daughter had attended regularly when she lived home. Well, it seems that during high school, the girl had played soccer. Debbie explained to me that that meant that they were away many weekends for tournaments or games. Other weekends, their daughter needed her rest or had homework to do because soccer and other sports took so much energy and time.

Our text this morning from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is a challenging piece for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. The practical topic Paul addresses is whether or not new Christians can eat meat which was offered as a sacrifice to an idol in a pagan temple before it was served for the meal. Even if we set aside our own modern context for a moment and just consider that ancient culture, the question might seem like an odd one. Why would there even be such a question? The issue likely arose for two reasons. One is that many of the new Christians in Corinth were Gentiles – they had been pagans before they came to believe in Jesus Christ. So these meals were long a part of their culture. They still associate the meat sacrificed to idols with pagan practice. The second reason the question likely arose is that it is quite possible that little meat was available other than that which had been part of a pagan sacrifice. Paul agrees that idols are not gods. So meat burned before idols has no meaning in terms of the meat itself. For Christians who truly understand that there is no problem.

This dilemma about meat sacrificed to idols was one of many practical questions the early church had to address. Because Jesus brought his ministry to his own people, the Jews, and was understood to be the Jewish Messiah, the earliest Christian converts were Jews. So when Paul and others began to convert Gentiles, the Jewish Christians wondered if the Gentiles should have to become Jews before they could be baptized as Christians – as followers of the Jewish Messiah. Paul's answer was that they did not. Questions arose about whether Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could eat at the same table since the Jewish Christians still observed Jewish religious dietary laws. The verdict was that they should all eat together in Christian fellowship. Our text this morning addresses an issue that arose within the Gentile Christian community. Paul's answer was to agree that there was, indeed, nothing inherently wrong with eating meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols. But he does not stop there.

Paul noted that knowledge isn't everything. The Christians who had written to him knew that the idols were not real gods, but knowledge without love leads to arrogance. That is hardly the position of a true follower of Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to acknowledge that there are various levels of understanding in faith. In doing so, he accepts that some of the Corinthians have a more sophisticated faith; they have been in the community of Christ longer; they have better clarity about Christian teachings. Those with a more mature faith differ from others who may be new converts or who simply have more of a challenge in letting go of the old ways or in growing their new Christian faith. Not everybody is in the same place, which means that not everyone is able to be clear that there is only one God and that consequently acts of worship to pagan gods are meaningless.

In recognizing these facts of the community, Paul then makes his case that there are times when the ones who see themselves as mature or sophisticated in the faith must make an accommodation for those who are not. Christians are called to be role models, Paul tells them. Christians have a responsibility for each other's faith and, consequently, for the salvation of their fellow Christians. If a Christian who is mature in her faith engages in a practice that may lead a less mature Christian to faith confusion and lead that fellow Christian to violate his own conscience, then harm is done to that fellow believer. This is serious business, Paul says, because then "you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin! When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ."

That's a heavy burden. It is a heavy thing to be even partly responsible for someone else's faith and, by implication, for his or her salvation. Shouldn't a person's individual salvation be their personal challenge? Well, maybe their challenge and the evangelist's job or the pastor's job – or maybe their salvation is the 'church's' job? Certainly each of us has a responsibility for our own salvation. No one sins for us. We turn ourselves from God and we have the option to repent, to turn back to God, or not. That said, we should recall that Jesus himself said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." (Mk 9:42) 'Little ones' in this saying, which is found in all three synoptic gospels, does not mean only children, but rather all those new in the faith. That is a pretty dire warning from Jesus himself about the requirement that we model faithful living. It is a clear call to be faithful role models always remembering those who watch and listen and imitate what we do and say.

Though Debbie was sad and confused about why her daughter did not care to come to church, when I gently suggested that she had gotten messages that maybe church wasn't so important Debbie had an answer ready. She and her husband wanted their daughter to participate in sports; they were not going to deprive her of those experiences of friendship, fellowship, and athletic skill in the few years in which she could participate. With school and sports and just needing time to be a teen she couldn't do everything. In her response, Debbie expressed the impossible dilemmas into which love sometimes draws us. Many of you know these impossible choices well. Unlike when I was a child and the world stopped on Sunday morning (even stores didn't open until noon), today so very much is scheduled to conflict with the Sunday worship time. They want to play soccer or baseball or dance or play in the band. They are teens who

need lots of sleep, have a staggeringly heavy study load, and need time just to be with friends and family - and time just to be. Something has to give.

But should that something be church? Is worship simply one among several equally important activities from which to choose on the Sunday menu? Is it really ‘soccer equals baseball equals dance equals sleeping-in equals worship’? Now, if you are thinking right now that I’m going to tell you the answer to those questions, think again. Of course, I think worship is important. Certainly God is more important than anything or anyone else, though I’d be the first to admit that like the rest of us I do not always act like I know that. My point in asking these questions is to invite you into reflection and conversation about how we model faith to the young, about how we communicate to them its importance in our lives. Over and over in my years of ministry I have listened to parents disappointed and saddened because their adult children do not attend church and are not raising their own children in the faith. Over and over those parents seem perplexed as to why this is the case. What I have come to believe is that a part of that ‘why’ of the matter is no mystery at all. Our youth spend their middle school and high school years getting the message that church is just one of many options open to them on a Sunday morning. When they stop playing soccer or baseball they simply chose other options – sleeping in, the Sunday paper, the Bears game, whatever. The ‘why’ of how our young adults end up un-churched is not a complete mystery. The question for us is, “Given the world the way it is, how do we do things differently?” When I say ‘we,’ I mean parents and the church and all of us individually.

Let’s be clear: my intention is not to try to make anyone feel guilty. What I encounter over and over again are parents who are good people caught in a culture which is much less faith-friendly than it used to be. What I hear is the struggles of good people of faith have in trying to be loving with their children, but caught in a real crunch of too many options in too little time. I get that. You are doing the best you can. I get that, too. But I also believe that what Paul says is true – we are called to be role models in faith. It is also true that we are losing our young adults. Some will return, as some of you did, when they have a child who needs baptizing or is of Sunday school age, but many others do not.

For those of you who currently have young children and youth, the question for your reflection is ‘how central is your faith to your life’? Is it the most important thing? Is it important, but no more important than other things in your life? How about worship? How important is worship in your life? Is your faith a joy? Does it sustain you or is it simply an obligation or something else? If it is important to you, it is likely something you want to pass on to your children. How can we help that happen? What can you do differently as parents so that your child has the experiences he or she needs yet receives the message that God and faith and worship are truly central? We know some things for certain. We cannot change how the world out there currently does things – at least not in the short term. That means changing the way we do things. Communicating that worship matters can be as simple as a family devotional time on weekends when getting here at 9:30 is not possible. Set a time requiring all to be present; light some candles; read a simple prayer and a piece of scripture; say the Lord’s prayer together; share

joys and concerns; close with a simple blessing. You don't have to make it up or write your own – there are many resources available. How about several families gathering once or twice a month to share a brief similar worship followed by fellowship – a meal or just desert or snacks and conversation? Another option would be to gather a few families struggling with the same dilemma and ask your pastors to plan an alternative worship service – after ToGather or at supper time on Saturday (a time that works very well for Catholics) or some other time. Any of those efforts communicates to our youth that this is important; that we can accommodate for the sports schedule, but that we do not cede worship to it.

That last option brings in the church's participation. The church's part in helping you all grow your youth in faith is vital. In some ways the church lets our youth (and you as parents) down. Let's be clear, we have wonderful, dedicated volunteers and staff working with the youth. They work hard, but it's not about them. The problem is a historical pattern which takes children and youth out of worship; the problem is a church culture which does not expect our high school youth to attend worship. What message does that send?

Some of the problem is that the church is out of sync with today's youth and young adult culture. The church – this church and the wider church – must be open to change, even radical change. The world is changing. Current generations operate in a much different culture than even their parents did as youth. Sitting and listening to someone like me yammer on – no matter how good the message – is not part of how they relate to the world of information. The church of the future must be flexible about its space, about its schedule, and about its worship styles. The church that will thrive must let go of how the folks over 50 prefer things – yes, I'm talking about most of us. Consider this – the last 25 years has probably been a greater change in terms of how the world operates than the previous 500 years. The only thing that compares is the industrial revolution. The church of the future cannot continue to do things in a manner which would be familiar and comfortable to our grandparents. We are called to model our faith. That means reaching those who are new to faith as well as those who are just beginning to grow in faith. Reaching today's youth means electronic communication. Reaching them means offering content in small packets, keeping the energy high, and allowing time for comments, feedback, questions, and time for reflection.

Paul tells us that faith is more about love than knowledge. In that he admits that both matter, but the love is central. If we are to love the next generations, we must see them for who they truly are and relate to them in ways that they can truly embrace the message of the love of God in Jesus Christ as their own core. Sisters and brothers, though we live in a nominally Christian culture, the culture will not help us nurture others in the faith. More often than not, it gets in our way. That said, it is always possible to communicate our joy in knowing the love of God in Jesus Christ. While parents have a special role in nurturing the faith of the young, they cannot do it alone. With God's help, the future is in all of our hands.