

Homily January 28, 2018: Epiphany 4B - 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and Mark 1:21-28 Jan Savory

Have you ever eaten meat offered to idols? Of course, I'm referring back to our first reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Some people might say I have – I'm referring to islama-phobes – because I have often eaten Halal meat, meat which has been dedicated to Allah. As I'm sure you realize, if you know me at all, I wouldn't consider Allah an Idol. There is only one God, however we worship and whatever name we use. But some Christians would consider that to be eating meats sacrificed to idols!

The situation Paul is talking about is very different. In Corinth. He's writing to the church in Corinth in reply to their questions, and to correct behaviours he's heard about, Reading Paul's letters reminds me of Jeopardy, We have the answer, but what was the question? In this case it seems there was a dispute about whether it was all right to eat meat that had been offered to idols. Misquoting Hamlet: "To eat or not to eat, that is the question". This might seem trivial to us, just buy your meat somewhere else. But in Corinth that wasn't really an option. Most of the meat sold there was meat let over from sacrifices (sacrificial meals) to one of the many gods, Many Corinthians could not afford even that; the only time they had meat was at the major festivals when some wealthy citizen bought the meat and gave it away. To those in his congregation, who were originally followers of the traditional gods, It would have felt as if they were worshipping Apollo, or Mars, or whoever rather than the one, true God. And if it was OK to eat the meat from the Market or this free meat, would it also be OK to eat the meat at a ceremonial meal to celebrate that god? That, I think, is where the temptation for the "weaker" members of the congregation comes in. That way they could have free meat at any time. To Paul, the situation seems straightforward. There are no other gods; therefore the idols are worthless; therefore the meat is fine. But participating in the ceremonies is worshipping the idol, in contravention of the 1st commandment.

This wasn't just an issue in Corinth. The early church was divided on this question. In Acts 15, we read about the council in Jerusalem, led by James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem. He, with the other leaders of the Church including Paul, removed the need for Gentiles to be circumcised but explicitly called upon the Gentile converts to refrain two things: from eating meat sacrificed to idols and from fornication; Paul and Barnabas took this message to the Churches they were visiting. Obviously, Paul had changed his mind by the time he wrote this letter to Corinth about five years later.

This is not a situation we are likely to encounter. Here in Canada, we are more likely to ask, "Do I want chicken, beef, or pork tonight?" Or, there is the contemporary continuum along the lines of vegan, vegetarian, lacto-ovo vegetarian, pescatarian, to those omnivores like who eat and enjoy anything, including haggis but (in my case) not spam!. Since we are unlikely to meet the situation Paul was dealing with in our everyday lives here and in this century, does Paul have a message for us in this passage? I believe he does. He is talking about conflict in the Church, and, yes, there is plenty of that today. To eat or not to eat wasn't the question for Paul. Whatever the presenting issue (eating meat) the real concern had more to do with freedom, and responsibility, and rights. The real question wasn't so much about eating meat, as about principles and people. At its heart, it was a question about love.

Paul is basically addressing the difference between what we have a right to do (eat the meat), and what it is right to do (consider how it impacts other people). Another way of saying this is that we should not put rules (what's right and what's wrong in a legalistic sense) before responsibilities (what's right and what's wrong in a moral or loving sense). As people who consider ourselves mature Christians it is our responsibility to make choices about our behaviour out of concern for those who most vulnerable and are less grounded in the faith. We should gauge the impact of our actions on the lives of others and use that as a reason to restrict our own behavior. The compass we should use in such situations is Love.

Love restricts our freedom. In a marriage, we agree to limit certain behaviours, like dating other people or even which way to hang the roll of toilet paper. In friendship, we might keep away from certain topics (religious? political? behavioural?) that cause friction. Likewise in church-land. Notice that Paul doesn't attack either side of the debate. He attacks both sides of the debate, both the conservatives (don't eat the meat) and the liberals (it's OK to eat the meat). Or, more precisely, he attacks anyone, regardless of

which side of a debate they stand on, who focuses on showing that "I'm right. You're wrong. And, it's stupid of you to think and act the way you do." Instead, he asks, "What is the most loving way to act?"

Which brings me to the Gospel story. This is another story about conflict: Jesus' conflict with the unclean spirit, but also Jesus having to decide between rules and love – which in time brought him into conflict with the leaders of Judaism.

A man with an unclean spirit started creating a disturbance in the synagogue. What was this unclean man doing in there? It was against the rules for anyone who was unclean to enter the holy place of worship. How did he slip in? Surely the ushers will remove him? Any Scribe or Rabbi worthy of the name would go along with that; they certainly wouldn't break the law and defy the 4th commandment by healing him (even if they could) on the Sabbath! As far as the rules went, they would be right.

But the teacher that week wasn't just any Rabbi. This Rabbi had already astonished the people by his preaching. He didn't preach like the Scribes, who had nothing new to say but just referred back to what other scribes and teachers had said. This man spoke from his own authority. I'm sure that upset some of the congregation. I can hear them saying, "That isn't how we do things here". They were astonished. Astonished means greatly surprised, and does not imply approval or disapproval. It comes from a root meaning confused, the same root that gives us the word maze. When the disturbance started, I can imagine the congregation wondering – what will this new guy do now? How will Jesus handle this? I doubt that any of them expected what happened next.

Jesus had every right, according to the law, to ignore the man, even to have him thrown out, but he chose to meet the situation head on and deal with the spirit which was tormenting the man. In doing what was most loving, he caused the kind of disagreement that Paul was talking about.

Mark didn't tell us what Jesus said when he taught that day, but did he need to? Jesus message was simple and consistent; a few verses earlier. Mark told us: "*Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news* of God,¹⁵ and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;¹⁶ repent, and believe in the good news.'*" His actions had to be consistent with bringing the Kingdom of God near.

In a modern church situation, we might not be talking about eating meat or casting out demons, but we have many issues that divide the Church, and can divide individual congregations. We also come up against situations that divide families and communities. In the church, our disagreements might be about how we worship, what hymns we sing, how we pray, whether we refer to God as Father, or Mother, the use of gender inclusive language in our worship. Words are neutral, neither good nor bad, but in some contexts, can be hurtful and even harmful. I have two friends who had difficult relationships with their fathers. One is delighted to find a "new" father in God. The other cannot use the name Father because it has such hurtful connotations. Being loving requires the first one to find different ways to refer to God when in the presence of the second one.

Wider issues that affect families and communities as well as the church include topics like same sex unions, abortion, doctor assisted suicide, use of foetal stem cells for research - the whole gamut of ethical dilemmas we face. There seem to be new ones all the time as our scientists learn to manipulate DNA. In cases like this it is hard to know the most loving way to act. This is more akin to the situation Jesus was in. If he obeyed the rules, he was safe as far as the leaders and congregation were concerned. But the man with the unclean spirit was still tormented and an outcast. Jesus chose the loving way; he healed the man and restore him to community. He acted to bring the Kingdom closer.

Often the easy answer is to follow the rules. Thou shalt not kill, so abortion is always wrong. But what about a 13 year old pregnant as a result of being raped? What if the pregnancy will kill the mother? Regardless of the question, each situation is different; each of us is different. Every situation must be examined prayerfully in the light of the Gospel, which calls us to hold our convictions, but always with humility and love. We must ask, "What is the most loving way to act?" This is not easy. It is always more important to be loving than to be right. It is love that brings the Kingdom here. Amen