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Sermon for January 22, 2011

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year B

Scripture Text: I Corinthians 8:1-13

To Know or To Be Known

There is a maxim that often seems to be offered as commentary when there is a report of someone doing something that results in negative consequences that goes something like, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” And isn’t it true? It seems that rarely does a day go by when there is not some report of some less than brilliant thing being done that ultimately turns out badly. Whether it is a house fire that was caused by someone who decided that using their gas grill indoors would not be a bad thing as long as they put it in the doorway thus blocking any means of escape or whether it is the driver who knows their antilock brake system will kick in when their car’s tires lose traction who none the less manages to wreck their car because they were doing donuts in an icy parking lot and ran into the only parked car in the lot because they lost all traction on the ice, having only limited knowledge of something but blindly insisting that one knows everything there is to know usually ends up worse off than if they had simply admitted that they were not the expert of everything.

Such is the environment that Paul encounters as he responds to yet another issue that has surfaced in the Corinthian communities of faith. As we have already seen from last week and will continue to see for several weeks to come, Paul finds that he must respond to a variety of questions and issues in the Corinthian house churches that, while they range in variety and expression, are none-the-less all connected, for Paul at least, around the central issue of what it means to live a life of faith as one who proclaims belief in the one God of all as witnessed to in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

In today’s text the presenting issue is whether it is alright to eat meat that has been used in the sacrificial ceremonies of one of the many pagan temples that are so much a part of the Corinthian landscape. Once again a division in the community of faith has occurred over the practice of purchasing and eating what is called “idol meat.” There are some in the community of faith who find the practice abhorrent and out of bounds because they are no longer a people who worship idols. As Christians they now understand that there is but one God and that all other gods are nothing more than human fabrications and are thus nothing. They know that idol worship will

amount to nothing so they shun all connection with these temples, their practices and the byproducts of their festivals, specifically this idol meat that is used in the sacrificial practices and then cooked and consumed in large festive gatherings that are more akin to a dinner party that is filled with all of the whose-who of the Corinthian elite community than anything that resembles worship that they might be now used to. But there are others in the community, who agree that idols are nothing and that worship of these idols will amount to nothing because, they too, worship and belong to the one true God who is creator of all and whom they have come to know through the witness of Paul who proclaimed to them the gospel of Jesus the Christ; but, who none-the-less see nothing wrong with attending these social gatherings and dinners in these temples to the idols because they know that their faith in God is rightly placed and thus they are freed from any false understanding that they once might have had.

So into midst of these warring factions of the Corinthian Community of faith comes Paul who, once again uses their own words and arguments to shift their understanding of the situation away from who is right and toward once again how they are called to live. One of the main arguments of both of these sides has been what one knows. Using their own words, no doubt coming from a letter they wrote to Paul, he parrots back to them their own maxim, "All of us have knowledge."

Now this is a short hand way of stating that which has come up more than once already in this letter and will continue to come to the surface throughout the rest of the letter. The more complete message that was written to Paul and that he is responding to is, "All of us have the knowledge of God that tells us that through Christ we have been freed from our old lives and are thus no longer held captive to the old ways that bound us to idols and meaningless worship." In short then the argument becomes either, we know that we are free because we now possess the truth and the truth has set us free. We are free to pursue our lives the way we want to because we know that idols no longer have any power over us. So we can do what we want, eat what we want, any time we want, in the company of whomever we want, any where we want because we are free in Christ; or we know that we are free in Christ from all of this useless idol worship and all of the trappings that go along with it so there is no need to now engage in such activity because it is nothing more than a waste of time and since we are now so much more enlightened and knowledgeable about all matters relating to faith we do not have time to waste in useless behavior, our lives of faith and our time are far more valuable than that.

So once again Paul does not challenge their basic premise that all have knowledge of God and are thus free. Instead he again adds to their proclaimed truth with his own corrective. All may have knowledge but knowledge puffs up while love builds up.

You see the issue here for Paul is not what they know or even what they think they know rather it is how they use that knowledge. And, so like what has already happened in this letter and will come up again and again, Paul states as clearly as he can that ***what one knows is of little importance if all one is interested in doing with that knowledge is to attempt to set oneself up as better than others.*** To claim to be free from all of the mundane issues of life because one knows that they have been saved so they can do whatever they like or to claim that there is no use in continuing to do the things that one used to do because they are saved and thus do not need to waste their valuable time is for Paul nothing more than useless arrogance that has no

place in the community of faith because its only aim is to puff up the individual at the expense of others.

And yet, for Paul, there is a much more important issue that underlies this and almost every other issue that will surface in the Corinthian community of faith and that is how the community lives together and how it treats all who are part of that community and therefore model for the rest of the world what it means to be a community of faith united together as part of God's family.

The very clear reality of the Corinthian community of faith and of any community of faith past, present, or future is that not all persons in any particular community of faith will have the same understanding, knowledge or training; rather there will be a variety of levels of understanding and therefore faith expression present. Every person in any community of faith will be at a different place in their own faith journey, there will be some who have been journeying for a great while and who will have come to understand God and Christ in very different and possibly more refined ways than others; and there will be some who are very new to the whole idea of faith expression and theological consideration who will have more questions than answers or even who will not yet have an idea what questions they should even be asking. But no matter what the level of their maturity of faith is, no matter how refined their theological thought processes may be, the one thing that all will have in common – the one thing that really matters – is that all are part of God's family known by us as the body of Christ.

And so while the issue of eating "idol meat" or not may have been the presenting issue from the Corinthian community of faith the real and more pressing issue for Paul and for us right here and now, is how do we express our faith in such a way as to not be a barrier or a stumbling block to those in our own faith community that may not yet be ready to fully grasp the choices we make.

Using the example of eating "idol meat" and building on their own assessment of the knowledge they possess, Paul challenges the Corinthian community of faith to consider not what they would do personally if left to their own devices but rather what is best for the whole of the community of faith that allows for honest consideration of how to express one's faith and loving and helpful assistance to those who may still be growing in their own faith. It is not enough, Paul says, to claim for yourself that idols are nothing so eating meat consecrated to idols is of no consequence if there are those in the community of faith who have not been able to come to that understanding and upon witnessing such behavior either lose their growing faith because what is said and what is done do not seem to match or worse yet remove themselves from the community of faith and return to their old lives. So the test is not what you know personally and what feels right to you personally rather it is how you in your life and actions help to build up all in the community of faith in such a way as to make it possible for all to come to understand more fully that it is not about what one knows about God that is most important but that one knows that they are known and loved by God.

For all of the language that is credited to Paul about what is sin and what is not, *the single most egregious action that any person of faith can do is to do something that hurts another person in such a way as to make them turn away from God's love and care.* For Paul to know God is

to love God and to love God is to care for others so that they too can come to understand that they are loved.

The fundamental message that Paul attempts to get across to the Corinthian community of faith and that comes to us over these many years is that every person is valuable to God. Every person matters to God and therefore every person is known by God. Our task as it was for the Corinthians and as it is for every community of faith around this world is to share that news in such a way as to build up all in that community of faith and in so doing make it possible for all in that community of faith to move out into the rest of the world sharing that very same message.

It is not what we know that is most important rather it is that God, through Christ, knows and loves us all. Thanks be to God for that!

Amen.

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