

Rev. Patrick W. Notley

Barrington Presbyterian Church
400 County Road
Barrington, RI 02806
(401) 245-2218
patrick.notley@barrpres.org

Sermon for February 12, 2012

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year B

Scripture Text: I Corinthians 10:1 – 11:1

For the Glory of God

One of the challenges placed before anyone who preaches is the appropriate selection of scripture text. While there are many guides and suggestions in the form of standard lectionaries, those are only suggestions that are meant to stimulate the preacher to consider whether the suggested portion of scripture is either long enough to include an entire thought of the original writer and short enough to not drive the current hearers to distraction. It is a fine line that offers little, if any, guidance on making the perfect selection.

Today's text is a good example of the challenges that are faced by both preacher and hearer. The portion of Paul's first letter to the Christian house churches in and around Corinth that we heard read this morning and will consider for a while is an entire chapter of that letter. There are many twists and turns in this tenth chapter and just as many places that one can settle into and spend a great amount of time considering. However lest you become anxious about how long this sermon might be, let me ease your mind a bit by letting you know, up front, that I do not intend on even attempting to deal with every theological idea or nuance that Paul asserts in this portion of this letter. Rather I want us to consider a larger concept that Paul promotes throughout the entirety of this letter but does so quite explicitly in this portion of the letter as he brings to a close a discussion that started in, at least, the sixth chapter of this letter and that has cropped up quite often in the letter up to this point.

Now the specific issue that has been either on the surface of this letter for all of these past five chapters or just below the surface has to do with what one can or cannot do as a Christian. The presenting issue that has again come to the fore is about what one is allowed to eat and in what circumstances one is allowed to eat. So following a concluding section to the digression we have looked at for the last two weeks in which Paul concludes that the most appropriate way to behave is to focus on what one may do for others rather than focusing on one's own self and concerns, Paul exhorts the Corinthian communities of faith to flee from idol worship and all of the related cultic practices that accompany the worship of idols. Specifically Paul exhorts the Christians in Corinth to refrain from attending and participating in the ritual feasts that accompany the

sacrifice of animals to one of the many pagan deities that were worshipped by those not of the Christian faith in and around Corinth. He calls on all in the Corinthian communities of faith to act in such a way because they are now bound to each other and to Christ through their own ritual meals that accompany the celebration and remembrance of Christ's ultimate sacrifice for all through his death and resurrection namely the Sacrament of Holy Communion. So now, far from being just an act of forbearance for those who might not be as strong in their faith as others, Paul argues that no one of the Christian faith should engage in such pagan rituals because to do so would be to divide one's loyalty between the one God who is creator, redeemer and sustainer of all that was, is, or is to come and one or more deities that are nothing more – to both Paul and the Christians in Corinth – than powerless human fabrications. For Paul there is no other grounding for one who would claim to be a follower of Christ than complete and total reliance upon the graciousness of God as shown to all through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. So to attend or participate in any religious setting that does not solely focus upon God alone is to engage in idol worship and to engage in idol worship is nothing less than seeking to destroy from within the community of faith whose very existence depends upon and is focused on God alone.

However, Paul is not an isolationist neither is he an advocate of withdrawing from and having nothing to do with anyone who is not within the Christian Community of faith. So while he will advocate that all who are Christian refrain from participating in the pagan rituals of that time, Paul does not put a blanket prohibition on buying and eating idol meat. You see the practice of that time and place was that when an animal was sacrificed in one of the many temples dedicated to one of the many deities of the area, some of the meat would be immediately cooked and consumed in the accompanying rituals while the rest would be taken to the local markets and put on sale as a way for the various temples to generate income and not waste the limited resources of fresh meat. So on any given day in the markets of Corinth much of the meat that was available for purchase and use in the homes of the citizens of Corinth came from some temple where it had been dedicated to one deity or another. So whether the Corinthian Christian sought to purchase meat for themselves and their family's use or whether they were invited to the home of one who might not be part of their community of faith there was a good chance that the meat being served was once used in a pagan ritual. And Paul argues that such occasions are very different than actually attending and participating in the rituals and since all things that are present on this earth come from God alone there stands no prohibition from buying such products for oneself or in being a guest at another's table and enjoying the whole of the meal. Except, he says, if you are explicitly informed that the food you are about to consume was used in pagan rituals by one who is troubled by this reality for then out of care for the other you should refrain. And in that statement Paul returns to a theme that he has promoted and will continue to promote throughout the entirety of this letter; that the most appropriate way to express one's faith is to do so by acting in such a way as to consider the other first.

But then, just as the first hearers of this letter and we ourselves begin to consider that Paul has said all that he needs to say on this subject, he once again shifts his focus to proclaim that while a foundational understanding of one's faith in Christ is about how one defers to the other in both action and thought, there is none the less a limit to that deference. So right after exhorting the Christians in Corinth to defer to the conscience of the other even if one is a guest in another's home, Paul inserts two rhetorical questions as a way of interrupting the possibility of taking what

Paul has written as the only appropriate response in any given situation. In other words, knowing the predilection of the Christians in Corinth to take any of what he has said or taught to its extreme conclusion without thoughtfully engaging those teachings to find for themselves how they should live out their faith in the midst of their complex lives, Paul places before them two questions as a way to encourage them to think before they act. So he asks – rhetorically – “Why should my liberty be subject to another’s conscience? And If I am appropriately thankful to God for what is offered to me to eat and drink, why should I be chastised if I actually eat and drink what is offered me?”

The purpose of these two questions is to challenge the Christians in Corinth to not radicalize what Paul was saying to the point that anytime anyone in the community of faith raised a concern about something all activity stopped until what was left of the community was nothing more than a gathering of people who could not accomplish anything for fear of upsetting someone. You see, what Paul understood so clearly in the context of the Corinthian Communities of faith but that is also applicable to us right here and now is that the moment two or more people gather together as a community of faith and then attempt to live out their faith as best they can there will eventually come a time of disagreement. Whether it is on issues of practice, or theology, or even church order there will always be differences of opinion and expression. And while a good principle to live and act by is to defer to others for the purpose of building up the whole of the community especially on issues that are not seen as ultimately critical to the corporate life of the community, the foundational principle that all must live by is that all that we do and all that we are is for the Glory of God alone. So while Paul encouraged the Christians in Corinth to defer to the conscience of another he did so with the clear understanding that first and foremost we do what we do for God and God’s glory.

And that means for Paul, for the Christians in Corinth, and for us right here and now when God, as witnessed to us in the life death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, is the singular focus and reason for why we do what we do in this place with each other and in all aspects of our lives we will not only find ourselves thinking of others first but will also find that we build up each other and the community of faith in all parts of our lives.

To God be the glory!

Amen.

© 2012 Patrick W. Notley

Barrington Presbyterian Church

www.barrpres.org

www.barringtontable.wordpress.com

