

Preach Love at All Times?

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What does ancient Corinth have to do with our world today? Much! Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, a hub of shipping and commerce. Corinth was crossroads filled with ships and people from all over the world. Being a good port city there was a large military presence including probably a fair number of retired military men and their families. The Romans would give retiring centurions a plot of land out in the empire as payment. This had several purposes. It moved them out of Rome and in effect established a large skilled military reserve in the far-flung reaches of the empire. The city was filled with temples from the Greek and Roman pantheons as well as those from the east. The mystery religions like the cult of Mithras would have had a strong presence. Idols and gods abounded from every corner of the globe.

The small but growing Christian community in the early 50s CE would probably have drawn heavily from the local Greek population with some Jewish Christians who had been expelled from Rome by the emperor. The church in Corinth was not just one church. These were small house churches run by people like Lydia, Chloe, Apollos and others. This small community was surrounded by a predominantly pagan culture with their cultic practices of idol worship and temple prostitution. Many of their members had probably worshipped at those temples. They were a powerful cultural force against the new Christian practices taught by Paul. This is the setting from which the concerns in today's passage arise.

One thing to note is that in this letter we have the second half of a communication. When reading Corinthians we must realize that we are seeing the answer to a letter or series of letters that had been sent to Paul. It is possible that even a small deputation from Chloe has visited Paul in Ephesus to complain about what is going on. This means we know the answer, but we do not know for sure what the question is or the exact nature of the problem. We must guess at what the issue is. The crisis though is clearly is a crisis of leadership in many respects. Does any of this sound familiar?

There are factions that are fighting and it reminds me of a coaster somebody gave me a little while ago. It says God loves you, but I'm his favorite. That right there should tie the situation in Corinth to our world today.

The presenting issues is one of eating food connected with temple worship. Now we might think that this would be an easy thing to avoid. However in Corinth as much

as 80% of the meat available for purchase and or consumption had been offered at one of the temples. The temples had a rotating series of feasts and celebrations and if one wanted to eat out in Corinth, you did not go to a restaurant like we think of. A person would find which temple was having a service and they would attend the meal afterward. The temples were where people went to socialize and do business. The meal would be made using some of the offering to that particular god or idol. If a wealthy person, and only the wealthy could buy meat on a regular basis, wanted meat for their home they would go to the temple meat market, purchase meat that had been sacrificed and bring it home to be cooked. Finding meat that had not been offered to a pagan god was quite a challenge.

So that is the setting of what Paul is addressing. What appears to be the problem is that members of the leadership in particular are buying, eating or going to these temples to eat and being seen by other members of their community and of the general population. Paul says that they are puffed up by their knowledge. This is human knowledge gnosis, as opposed to sophia which is Godly knowledge. Paul warns them that what builds up a community is love, agape in Greek which is Godly love. The leadership is self-centered and prideful in Paul's mind. Yes they know and Paul knows that these idols or pagan Gods have no power over them. Paul's concern however is for the weaker members of their churches and those outside the church. Some of these people may be recent converts who might hold in the back of their minds that while the leaders say these idols have no power I'm not sure. It is possible that some of the weaker members may even be hedging their bets so to speak. Thinking, well I know that this does not make any difference, but what harm can it be to just partake of the festival just in case. The hold may be something like superstitions in our world.

Then the action of the leaders becomes a stumbling block for the young church. There is implied throughout the letter an arrogance and pride by the leadership. They have great knowledge, but are not looking out for their flock in the sense of Christian love. It is clear there are strong factions. Unfortunately church fights are not anything new and this is just another parallel between Corinth and today. In the text some of the sentences or phrases are in quotes as if Paul is quoting slogans of the various churches. Each faction seems to think they are right and the others are wrong. The real issue is that standard they use to judge however is human knowledge rather than the love of God.

One could imply that several of these factions may have written Paul and he has consolidated all of these into one blast to all of them where he basically says, what builds up your community is love and I'm not feeling the love here baby! Time and again he says to the leaders, stop it, you are not setting the example that I want. You are not living as Jesus taught us to live or love as the case may be.

The problem, the challenge is to take Paul's message to the Corinthians to heart. We all, leadership and people need to behave like the Christians Jesus calls us to be. We

need to operate out of love. We need to be conscious that we are judged by how we live our lives. Do we practice the gospel message?

Churches today suffer from the same issues, there really is nothing new here. We are a human organization filled with people who make human mistakes; we just call them sin. At the vestry retreat we will be looking at how we as a parish handle conflict and make plans and strategies to handle the conflict, which inevitably will happen in any parish. Not that there is anything brewing right now, but what better time to make plans. As we move forward in our vision process we are all going to be asked to tackle some hard questions, not unlike those facing the early church in Corinth. The churches in Corinth were in uncharted waters and so are we. The golden age of Christianity if there ever was such a thing is gone. We live in a world that is rapidly changing and we must adapt as a church or die.

I truly believe that this question is the single biggest issue facing Christianity today. Many people who have left the church were driven out by people acting in ways that were anything but Christian. Many who stand outside looking in have no interest in walking in the door of an organization they see as hypocritical at best and filled with bigots at worst. How many treat visitors like the Borg from Star Trek. You will be assimilated, made into us regardless of what gifts and talents you may bring. There are parishes that only retain 1 in every 10 visitors. Why, because the visitor does not feel welcome for who they are. We do a pretty good job here, but we too need to look at this issue.

Rob Bell in his book *Love Wins* (which I highly recommend) writes about visiting websites of churches and going to the page that says what they believe. There are the usual statements about how God loves us all etc. etc. Then time and time again they state something to the effect of "if you don't believe as we do you are going to hell." Worse they state that once you die there is no hope. You only get one shot and if you blow it God will condemn you to eternal fire. My goodness is that what we really are about, providing heavenly fire insurance from a wrathful God? No wonder those outside the church tell researchers that they don't want anything to do with a God like this. They ask questions like, "How can you worship a God that says he is about love, but turns his back on over half the world population? If this is God's love, then I will take a pass."

Then there are those who spout off in the media about Christian love in one breath and then spew hatred of whatever group they feel are sinners whether it is someone from another faith or sexual orientation, just name the group. These are people who are convinced that they are God's favorite and I think they are ultimately in for a surprise. Unfortunately this is the face of Christianity today to many. This is the face that gets all the news coverage.

I am reminded of a presentation made on Cape Cod to our ecumenical group by an Imam. When challenged by the somewhat hostile audience he talked about what his view and that of most moderate Moslems is about his faith. One person said to him,

but that is so reasonable, I don't have a problem with what you are saying, why don't the more moderate Moslems get out there and show the world what you are really like. He turned and said, "Well the ultra conservative hate spewing Christians are what we in the Islamic world see, why don't you moderate Christians get out there and show the world what you believe?" You could have heard a pin drop. Why do we hesitate to proclaim ourselves as Christians and bearers of the gospel?

Stop and think for just a moment. What if you walked or drove around town all day like I do, in clothing that says I am a priest. Dressed in a manner that says I represent Christianity. Talking to the clerk or cashier in the store and consciously thinking this person is judging the church based on how I act. Would it change your behavior behind the wheel of a car? What would change if anything?

St. Francis De Sales said, "He who preaches with love, preaches effectively." St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times, use words only when necessary." These two saints give us what we need in this world today. First of all preach the Gospel of Jesus by our actions. Treat all human kind with the love of Christ. Then with our words let us proclaim the love the Jesus has. Our words and our actions must be consistent; consistent with the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus.