

Showing the Way

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I made the comment to the vestry last Saturday that without a doubt the books of the bible that speaks the loudest to our current world, be it our local city or our country are Paul's letters to the churches in Corinth. Today's epistle is just such an example of Paul talking to the church as a whole, but with some very specific thoughts to the leadership. This Sunday as we hold a congregational meeting and I install our new wardens at the 10:30 service this seems an appropriate text to focus on.

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?

The problem 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. 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 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 parallels should be fairly obvious by now. First of all how much of the church fights within and without our denomination are based on knowledge taking a back seat for love.

How often does the media today tear apart the church and why? Unfortunately I fear we make this far too easy by the way many “Christians” behave. To be honest the biggest obstacle to evangelism for most Episcopalians is the baggage that the word Christian seems to carry among those who are our greatest potential market, the un-churched. Just the other night there was Ted Haggert on the news with the story of his identification of his sexuality as heterosexual with issues. Yet this is just one in a long string of major church leaders who have brought disgrace on Christ’s church. Living in the Diocese of Massachusetts I can tell you just how low the image of the priesthood is. I rarely wore clericals when walking the streets of Boston because of the abuse I took. And much of that was legitimate anger at horrible abuses, unfortunately they could not tell the difference between a Roman priest and me. The attacks on the church in movies like Religiosity and books that call religion the worst thing to happen to the civilized world have climbed to the top of the NY Times best seller list in recent years are probably not much different from what was thrown out at the early church in Corinth. There is an open hostility towards religion by many and it is understandable, understandable because we have not always operated out of love.

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?

When confronted with a conflict between deciding actions based on law or love, knowledge or compassion, I try err on the side of love. That has brought me into confrontation on occasion with church authorities like the time I asked for a canon of the church to be waived because of a pastoral concern. Now the bishop had the ability to do it and did agree with me, but not before I got a very stern lecture from Bishop John.

However as I listened to him I kept a mantra in mind that I want to leave all of you with. When making decisions based on love or knowledge ask yourself this.

When the time comes for me to answer for the choices I have made in my time on earth, I would rather explain to God why I loved too much and too freely rather than explain why I loved too little. I believe if we all acted and treated everybody with the love Jesus taught, we would all be better off and the world would be better off.