

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Listening and Loving

For a long-time, one of the coolest things that I was ever a part of in ministry was a conversation that I helped host and organize when I was in college. I went to this beautiful, deeply faithful Christian college not too far from here. The student body was almost entirely from churches that had a conservative Christian view of things. Talk about being a minority -- I was one of five Episcopalians on campus. It made for an interesting environment for a cradle Episcopalian to figure out who he was and what he believed.

This project that I was a part of might seem funny to talk about now but it was and still is significant in some ways. I teamed up with an Episcopal classmate of mine who also is now a

priest and we convinced the administration to let us show a documentary about how the Bible views questions of sexuality. Specifically, at that time in the 2000s and in that place, we were talking about whether it was a sin or not for someone to be gay or lesbian.

The campus administration was uneasy about the conversation in the first place. Among other things, they feared outsiders who might not appreciate the campus's culture. And I'm sure they didn't think Episcopalians were qualified to teach the Bible. But to their credit, they let us show this film and host a conversation with faculty experts in Bible and psychology. We had 120 people show up for this thing, over 10% of the student population at the college, and the evening was a huge success. I don't know if people left our event with a different outlook on questions of sexuality. I cannot say we arrived at some definitive conclusion as a group. What I do know is that I learned a valuable lesson that night which I think is supported by our reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians today. The lesson I learned is this: How you have a conversation is just as important or more important than the conclusions reached. How we have a conversation matters deeply and is an end in itself.

The Church may have a mission to live alternatively, offer a different imagination, a different set of practices, a different culture, but there is no denying that we are influenced and shaped by our society, by the world. There's no denying that we are shaped by the world we live in for better and for worse. And, as Paul's letter from one of the first churches demonstrates, the body of Christ will struggle with how to be in relationship with each other and how to come together as a church when the world is pressing in.

You would not think that food sacrificed to idols had any relevance today, but it surely does because it created tensions with the Body of Christ that are identical to tensions we face now. The controversy then was fairly simple. In Corinth, a cosmopolitan and yet religious city, the meat market was a regular stopping point for most citizens. What do you do if, as a follower of the one God who rejects idols made of human hands, who commands you have no other Gods before him, you find yourself gathering to eat with your family and friends, perhaps even as a church, and the meat you serve came from an animal sacrificed to an idol? Is it right to support systems of idolatry? Is it right to pray over and eat food that has been "sanctified" in the name of a false god?

This issue had probably started out small. Perhaps one member, a penny-pincher, just wanted to save some money and get the meat on sale. Perhaps a church member wanting to achieve greater purity had decided not to eat such meat. But eventually the Corinthian Christians felt like they had to pick a side. They had drawn a line in the sand. And now, the unified, singular, corporate Body of Christ was in factions over how to relate to this issue of the world which they bumped into and could no longer avoid. "You're either with us or against us," somebody said.

Food sacrificed to idols -- that was their issue -- but you can substitute in anything that you would like, anything that is divisive today, anything that you know we don't want to talk about. How do we do it? How do we stay in relationship with people whom we know are so wrong about such an important issue? Can't they hear what I'm saying to them? Can't they understand what the evidence says? It should be clear, but it rarely is.

When Paul gets to writing, he warms them up for a long time before getting to food sacrificed to idols. This is chapter eight, after all! When he finally gets to the controversy of the day, it's fascinating what he tells them. As to the meat, "Sure," Paul says, "the meat from the idol's altar is just meat because the idol is not real. Many of you *know* that," he writes. "But, if this meat is causing your brother or sister a problem, then why not just let it go?" The meat isn't the point. It's not about the food sacrificed to idols. "Who cares about that?" says St. Paul. What Paul wants to address is how the church let this issue cause brothers and sisters in Christ to treat one another as less than. Whether or not you eat the meat or not -- who cares? -- but whether or not you show love towards a member of the church -- that matters. "When you sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience [even] when it is weak, you sin against Christ."

What matters, therefore, is if you acknowledge those with whom you disagree. What matters, therefore, is if you can love them. And the best way to know if we can love them, is if we can simply listen to what they're saying -- I mean really listen. Look them in the eye. Ask questions to clarify. Listen to someone with whom you disagree. And, for goodness sake, be careful with thinking that you know better -- as if we have never been wrong before. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him."

It turns out that how we have a conversation is just as important -- perhaps more important -- than the conclusions we reach. Having a conversation thoughtfully and with humility is an end in itself. This is why we are especially excited to offer online conversations this Lent through *My Neighbor's Voice*. *My Neighbor's Voice* is a ministry started by one of our own parishioners which is growing in it's impact all the time. It brings people together for challenging conversations by providing a structure where listening is valued and personhood is respected. We will be offering online sessions during Lent for St. John in the Wilderness. I hope you will sign up to get to know each other better and learn how to listen again.

It really is at risk of being lost, you know? We have let issues of our world divide us, but we should also remember our lessons from today's reading that the issue is rarely the issue. Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. The question is "Can we hear one another?" The question is "Can we love one another still?" I don't have to tell you that our ability to encounter someone who disagrees with us is at risk of being lost forever. But God's project is not just for us to be neighbors with people who differ from us, it's not just to frequent the same businesses,

it's not just to drive the same roads or shop at the same stores. God's project is for us to be the church with those with whom we disagree. And if we want to do that then we must dedicate ourselves to having conversations in a way that glorifies God. Forget about the outcome! Just learning to listen again and being willing to encounter another child of God and to hear their story -- that's what we're here for -- because how we have a conversation matters, because listening to someone and loving someone is so similar that most people can't tell the difference.