

Epiphany 4, Year B
1 Corinthians 8: 1-13
February 1, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

Words Overlooked:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

I have a confession to make. There is more to the passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians than we heard today. Two weeks ago, when John Burke and I were planning the music for this service, we looked at the readings. I said to him, "O brother, guess I'll preach on the psalm." On Wednesday, at staff meeting, as we were going over the bulletin, I said, "We don't need the second half of the Corinthians reading. It's arcane stuff about food sacrificed to idols. Far removed from our lives." And out it went.

Then I sat down to write my homily. I read the scripture. I worked with the commentary. I prayed. I thought about the psalm and our God of compassion. I played with the word "compassion." The Hebrew word is "rah-cham"—it comes from the word for womb—that place of nurture and protection that "yields so that wholeness and well-being may happen"(Turner, 98).

Then something clicked for me. I looked back at Paul's letter to the church in Corinth—that contentious and diverse group of Christians struggling to live together in community. This time I read the passage slowly, looking for what was drawing me to it or it to me. I'm never sure just how that works. I lingered on the words, "Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up." "Could that be it?" I asked myself and then continued reading.

Hear the part I left out:

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. (1st Corinthians 8: 7-13)

As I read the last part of the passage—that part about becoming a stumbling block—I found myself wondering, "What is it that makes me want to skip this part?" "What's here that's troubling me—rattling my cage?"

And then I remembered a conversation I once had with people I had come to love and respect—the folks who attended the mid-week service at my parish in Albuquerque.

Each week after the service, they went out to lunch. One snowy day when school was closed and church was open I joined them. On our way to lunch my friend Juanita said, “We never order meat, Sharon’s a vegetarian.” “So what,” I wondered to myself and then added, “No skin off my teeth, I won’t make her eat my meat.” I can’t remember what I ordered, but I suspect I ordered meat. After all it was my right. It’s a free country, don’t you know.”

That’s why I try to skip this passage. Not because of its arcane nature. Not even because it focuses on food sacrificed to idols. That’s a non-issue in our time and place. But because it reminds me of that day I ordered meat huffily ignoring Juanita’s loving guidance.

I bet I’m not alone. I’ll wager others wince when they run across this passage. After all, there’s so much more to this question Paul addresses than food and idols. This passage cuts to the core of how we live in communities of diversity.

This passage and the premise that runs beneath it and the letter that surrounds it run counter to much that our culture holds sacred. Paul challenges the notions of rights and privilege that so permeate our culture—our sacred rights, our vaunted privilege, the individual supreme. Paul challenges the notions of rights and privilege and the primacy of the individual. Paul raises questions about how we live together in diverse communities.

The church at Corinth was a diverse group of Christians coming from different cultures and different stations in life—some rich, some poor, some Jews, some Gentiles, some insiders, some outsiders. Some folks were claiming their privilege, asserting their rights, doing as they pleased. They were indifferent to the impact their actions had on other members of the church. “No skin off my teeth,” they said to themselves as they polished off their meat.

Paul is calling them and calling us to a different standard, a different way of being—a way of living and being based not on our rights or our exclusive knowledge—the kind of knowledge priests and the seminary trained often claim—but a way of living grounded in love that builds up and affirms the other and yields claims based on rights or privilege or individual, unconnected ways of living. A way of living that claims no bonuses when times are tough. A way of living sensitive to the needs and sensibilities of others. A way of living graciously in community.

Paul says to the church at Corinth, to the folks who knew—who just knew that meat sacrificed to idols was just meat, that that kind of knowledge—insider knowledge, specialized knowledge, knowledge that divides—puffs up while love builds up. Love doesn’t claim rights; love doesn’t exercise privilege; love doesn’t flaunt specialized knowledge. Love builds up through patience, kindness and making space for other ways of seeing and being and living in the world. Love doesn’t take what it can; love extends a hand.

Like the church in Corinth, we, too, are a diverse community. We come from different backgrounds; we practice different pieties; some want change yesterday—"Bring on Rite III," they say; others wonder why we ever gave up the 1928 prayer book; some pray standing up; some kneel; some call for same-sex marriage; some say that's anathema. All gather at the table and all are fed together side-by-side. We are called to live together, you and I, lives of compassion, lives that offer one another nurture and protection, lives that yield up our special claims so that wholeness and well-being may come to one and all. God's gift to us. The gift of gracious love. Thanks be to God.