

Resurrection for the Real Life: *Love Over Liberty*

-Several years ago, in the middle of our Covid crisis, a friend of a mentor of mine posted a short Bible passage on Facebook. It was from this obscure and one-might-think irrelevant chapter of 1 Corinthians – which will be part of our text for today. Two verses from 1 Corinthians went viral. Quite unexpectedly. Can you imagine what they were?

I realized this week that since I was a young man the passage he posted has been really crucial for my own walk of faith. Really central to how I navigate the world as a follower of Christ. But since I've been a pastor, I've never opened it in worship. And I wonder if it might become a chief reference point for you, too.

Here's the question at the heart of the controversy in Corinth Paul is addressing: *Should a faithful Christian eat meat that has been sacrificed to the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses?* I'm sure you can just imagine scores of social media posts and real-life applications coming from Paul's answer to this riveting question.

Should a follower of Christ who longs to be faithful eat meat that has been sacrificed to the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses?

Imagine the lay of the land in Corinth. I'm going to paraphrase Eugene Peterson's teaching. In Corinth (as in other Greek cities) *all* animals were butchered sacrificially. Meaning that this was the unexamined culture. When people took their animals to market and sold them, the butcher spilled their blood as an offering to Zeus, Aphrodite or Hermes. And there were ritual incantations that dedicated the meat to a god or goddess. It was kind of a perfunctory official religion. Little statues of the gods watched on. In truth, it probably didn't mean too much to people.

But followers of the risen Christ had to ask the question. If I eat this meat, am I bowing to false gods? Am I somehow endorsing the superstitions of Greco-Roman mythology? What should I do?

One Christian answer was: Hey - these gods are illusions. Of course we can eat the meat! In Christ we've been set free. Even the butchers, if pressed, probably consider it all nonsense. We can't get spiritually contaminated by what we eat. Peterson would have us note that this answer, sincere as it was about Christian freedom, also came with superiority – with patronizing sarcasm and impatience toward Christians who thought otherwise. The less knowledgeable. The less mature. Those who don't yet get it.

Which made the Church – the Body of Christ - feel less free. At least for the sisters and brothers with hesitations about eating 'idol meat.' They themselves felt unsure, even guilty to keep consuming idol meat – whether from a sense of unfaithfulness to Jesus, or from a sense of unfaithfulness about what it communicated to pagan friends. (They might have also wanted to suggest how convenient it was for their 'mature' Christian counterparts that freely eating meat meant not having to swim against the stream of the prevailing culture.) But those with hesitations

about eating felt inferior – were *made* to feel inferior – by those who were certain that it was their liberty, their *right*, to eat. They were being criticized for not having quite grown to full knowledge and maturity. They were embarrassed about voicing their objections and insulted by condescension.

So should a follower of Christ eat meat that's been sacrificed to the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses? (We might ask: Should a follower of Christ drink alcohol at parties? Or: Should a follower of Christ get a Covid vaccination?)

Steve Lympus shared with us last week how Paul's first letter to the Corinthians gets at viewing all of life - not just life in religious spaces, but *all* of life - through the lens of the gospel.

Listen, then, to how the Apostle Paul answers the question. This is from 1 Cor 8.1-13. It's Eugene Peterson's *Message* translation.

8 ¹⁻³ The question keeps coming up regarding meat that has been offered up to an idol: Should you attend meals where such meat is served, or not? We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions—*but* sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.

⁴⁻⁶ Some people say, quite rightly, that idols have no actual existence, that there's nothing to them, that there is no God other than our one God, that no matter how many of these so-called gods are named and worshiped they still don't add up to anything but a tall story. They say—again, quite rightly—that there is only one God the Father, that everything comes from him, and that he wants us to live for him. Also, they say that there is only one Master—Jesus the Messiah—and that everything is for his sake, including us. Yes. It's true.

⁷ In strict logic, then, nothing happened to the meat when it was offered up to an idol. It's just like any other meat. I know that, and you know that. But knowing isn't everything. If it becomes everything, some people end up as know-it-alls who treat others as know-nothings. Real knowledge isn't that insensitive.

We need to be sensitive to the fact that we're not all at the same level of understanding in this. Some of you have spent your entire lives eating "idol meat," and are sure that there's something bad in the meat that then becomes something bad inside of you. An imagination and conscience shaped under those conditions isn't going to change overnight.

⁸⁻⁹ But fortunately God doesn't grade us on our diet. We're neither commended when we clean our plate nor reprimanded when we just can't stomach it. But God *does* care when you use your freedom carelessly in a way that leads a fellow believer still vulnerable to those old associations to be thrown off track.

¹⁰ For instance, say you flaunt your freedom by going to a banquet thrown in honor of idols, where the main course is meat sacrificed to idols. Isn't there great danger if someone still

struggling over this issue, someone who looks up to you as knowledgeable and mature, sees you go into that banquet? The danger is that he will become terribly confused—maybe even to the point of getting mixed up himself in what his conscience tells him is wrong.

11-13 Christ gave up his life for that person. Wouldn't you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him—because, as you say, it doesn't really make any difference? But it *does* make a difference if you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin! When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ. A free meal here and there isn't worth it at the cost of even one of these “weak ones.” So, never go to these idol-tainted meals if there's any chance it will trip up one of your brothers or sisters.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Let's pray. [...]

-OK. So so what does Paul say? How does he respond?

He suggests that how we handle even our liberty *matters* because of the gospel. He suggests that we *practice viewing all of life through the lens of the gospel*.

Remarkably, the life of faith - it's not just about getting our thinking, speaking and acting *right*. Not just about knowing what's right. (Did you notice Paul actually *agrees* that those more certain are technically right. That followers of Christ are *indeed* free in whether they eat or don't eat the meat!) Still. It's not enough to know something. Not enough to get it right. The danger that seems to come with being right – and perhaps even more-so among those who achieve religious certainty - is coming to demand our rights. ‘Christ gave up his life for that person,’ says Paul. ‘Wouldn't you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him.’

So here are the verses from Paul's letter to Corinth (Chapter 10.23-24) that went viral on Facebook during Covid:

“I have the *right* to do anything,” you say
—but not everything is *beneficial*.

“I have the *right* to do anything”
—but not everything *builds up*.

No one should seek their own good,
but the good of others.

Even though it may be just fine *morally* to eat meat, it may not be fine *ethically*. Because something that may cause no offense to God may still cause your sister or brother to stumble in their faith. Even though it may be right by God, it may not be beneficial; it may not build up. And so, even though it may be right by God, it may not be right by God. Do you follow me?

-When I was an upperclassman in college, I helped to lead a freshman Bible Study. It must have been one of our first nights together when a couple of the freshmen guys found out I was a member of a fraternity. And hesitantly, but with more confidence than was comfortable to me,

they let me know that if they were to see me out at a fraternity party on campus drinking beer they would (quote) ‘lose all respect for me.’

In my memory I can actually see the lighting of the room at that moment. I think I must have been nearly 21 if not there already. I was from West Texas, the land of the cowboys. I had worked in Washington DC for a year before even coming to college. I felt like I was a responsible guy. I styled myself a sincere and somewhat passionate follower of Christ. And I was really joyful about the freedom I had found in Jesus from fussy, rule-bound religion. And here were these guys – frankly a little new to the terrain of college – who were telling me point blank that if they were to see me out and about, I would become a stumbling block to their faith. That I would transgress 1 Corinthians, chapter 8. Which, yes, I had been taught to hold central in considering my ethics; which, yes, sprang to mind.

The standard for our conduct is not only *liberty* but *love*. And the standard for love is whether our thinking, speaking, and acting build other people up. Especially the Body of Christ.

- Wow! It’s hard enough to restrain myself from things that are outright wrong. But now we’re talking about restraining ourselves from things that are not necessarily morally unobjectionable. Things that may simply mislead or injure others in their journey of faith. Love has restraint at its core.

Where does the rubber meet the road for you in these verses? What practical situations do they speak to?

How should a follower of Christ consider what they consume?
How should a follower of Christ steward relationships and sexuality?
How should a follower of Christ handle their money?
How should a follower of Christ vote?
How should a follower of Christ dress?
How should a follower of Christ parent or grandparent or
How should a follower of Christ think participate in politics and public policy?
How should a follower of Christ think about gambling?
How should a follower of Christ think about aging and end-of-life care?

-Consider the call to generosity, maturity, and wisdom in these verses:

“I have the *right* to do anything,” you say
—but not everything is *beneficial*.
“I have the *right* to do anything”
—but not everything *builds up*.
No one should seek their own good,
but the good of others.

Says Eugene Peterson: ‘The church isn’t a place where we know all the right answers and insist that others do, too. If we focus only on getting right answers in church, we become stuffy and

arrogant and look down on the people who don't have it straight yet. We're in the love business, not the knowledge business.'

Now, just to be plain, here's what I suspect made these words go viral. I imagine tons of people being really grateful that someone was finally calling out 'all those other people' on seeking their own good, on not seeking what was beneficial for others.

But that's not the point, of course. Not those other people. What would a world look like – what would a *church* look like, what would a neighborhood look like, what would a family look like, where we heard these verses to us ourselves?

What if this obscure meat-sacrificed-to-idols passage became a centering point for Christian ethics? Even if we followers of Christ came to different conclusions about meat and vaccines and money and sex – and we would; we most certainly would and do – still *wouldn't the world so touched by such care for the conscience of others* be a better place?

Viewing all things through the lens of the gospel means we are in the love business, not the knowledge business. Viewing all things through the gospel sends you and me to do what is *beneficial*, sends you and me to *build up*. 'Build up.' I see those who are struggling to find their way given direction. Those dispirited given hope. Those who are weak offered dignity. Those who are ashamed covered in mercy. Those who are broken down lifted to security and strength. Those who are uncertain or confused given freedom to work out their faith in grace.

-What do *you* hear the Lord saying to *you*...?

Listen for Jesus now. And speak to him in the quiet of your heart....