

Squabbling

A Sermon Expositing 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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One says, “I want that block, give me that block.” The other will say, “No, I had it first, it’s mine.” And then there are four hands on the block instead of two, the pitch and volume of the argument increase while the coherence decreases. The time for words is out the window and the furious scuffle is on. This won’t end until one or both are in tears and perhaps bruised. A sensible adult, a teacher or a parent steps in and calms the shouting long enough to say, “It’s ok, there are plenty of blocks to play with.” Can you see the wonderment in the eyes of the little ones as they consider the profound reality that’s just been revealed to them. “Of course! There are other blocks to be played with. This solves the whole problem!” Both of their eyes brighten as they realize the implications.

They’ve come to a peaceful resolution. In fact, somewhere in that kernel of interaction, “there are more blocks,” lies the secret to world peace. There is quiet and solitude throughout the playroom and all seems right about the universe just as one of the children, tears dried, grand smile dawning, looks at the other and says, “Did you hear her? She said to get your own block, this one’s mine!” And so the struggle goes on, and on, and on for millennia.

Yes, millennia. Sure, it’s a drama that plays out in homes and classrooms and on playgrounds for a few years between siblings and classmates, but it is also the drama that has played itself out in the church for millennia. The letter we call First Corinthians is apparently an early example of a church leader, Paul, trying to solve more than one squabble between toddling followers of Jesus. It’s not actually the first correspondence. It’s clear from the structure of the letter that Paul is offering some unsolicited advice and then transitioning to answer some questions apparently asked of him by the Corinthians in a previous letter. There’s also apparently been a messenger at some point who has reported some disturbing findings about the Corinthian church to Paul - tattletale!

Through one of these avenues, Paul has heard about an ongoing squabble among members of the community in Corinth. Some of them have been partaking of meat sacrificed to idols. Before you let your imagination run away with you and picture dark, creepy séance-like rituals understand that this practice was actually quite common and state sanctioned. It wasn’t considered dark by anyone. To the contrary, it was likely a festive atmosphere when feasts were held at the temple of a Roman deity and the same meat that was ritually given as sacrifice was also shared among the participants, virtually everyone. It was a time of sharing and festivity, except some within the wider Corinthian community, a portion of those following the risen Christ took exception on account those deities were not YHWH, not *their* God.

Paul’s advice though is not to those who are *protesting* the consumption of the meat sacrificed to idols, it’s to those within the community of Christ followers who *are* partaking of the meat. His instruction isn’t what you might guess it would be though. He seems to suggest that, yes, eating the meat is fine and dandy on account that the idols are merely stone. The meat is not truly sacrificed to gods, because other gods do not exist! He

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

affirms the logic of those reveling in the opportunity to enjoy a good community barbecue. But just as soon as he's affirmed their *logic*, he roasts their *attitude*.

"Can't you see," he suggests, "that there are some among you for whom the idols still do exist in a way?" He calls those who have been enjoying the meat sacrificed to idols, "strong" and those who abstain from the meat as the "weak." That's probably more of an adoption of the language of those he's addressing than it is a judgement on Paul's part. The choice to eat meat or not rose from two different perspectives on the life of faith. In one view following Jesus and availing oneself to his grace grants one a high degree of freedom – a kind of spiritually enlightened permissiveness. Another view relied upon carefully considered, rigorous standards of behavior by which to identify with Christ and set oneself and one's community apart from the world – a moralistic ethic.

That fledgling movement of Jesus followers in Corinth and around the Roman Empire has grown into what we now call Christianity and the dichotomy between strict moralism and permissive spirituality exists still within the global church. We don't much talk about meat sacrificed to idols anymore though. Rather that dichotomy shows up in conversations about affirmation of LGBTQ+ persons, about the shape of families, about how faith intersects with the public sphere, about *whether* faith *should* intersect with the public sphere, about how resources are shared in our communities and what voice churches should have in those conversations, about the value of human life in all its varied forms, and yes about politics. These and a million other areas of conflict exist not only within the universal church, but in individual congregations. Yes, even in our congregation. I'll pause here for your gasps of surprise.

In a modern age marked by so much rancor and polarization it is good to see that this ancient text - that the apostle Paul - offers for us a vision of how followers of Jesus can work through conflict. And that word "through" is operative here. There is no sidestepping of conflict in Paul's vision. His journey ventures boldly straight *through* conflict.

With a quick read it would seem that Paul is offering his outside, authoritative view to settle matters to put an end to the squabbling. He concludes that members of the community should not eat meat sacrificed to idols. That settles it. Except that isn't what Paul reasons at all. He actually first concludes that it *is* permissible to eat the idol meat and only after further explanation reverses course and instructs that the meat should *not* be eaten. If we're not paying attention it might sound like someone dancing around the issues, another classic way to deal with (or not deal with as the case may be) conflict. Paul seems to know though, that while picking one side to prevail over the other may not be real resolution, neither is settling on a vacuous "middle way" that panders to both sides. A community that never takes a side is a community that stands for nothing and therefore a community that does nothing.

So listen closely to what Paul says. He proposes a path forward, but that path is based on a completely different argument. He agrees with those who say that eating idol meat is just fine on account of it having been sacrificed to deities he doesn't believe in anyway, but he tempers his *opinion* with something else – with care for those who haven't yet or who won't come to such a realization. He has enough empathy for those who hold another perspective as to see and understand what it would be like to live under a program the basis of which makes no sense. In the case of idol meat Paul felt that it would be harder for those who believed eating it was wrong to live with the internal consequences of doing so than it would be for those who believed it was fine to live without eating it. That is, he proposed a program forward based more on the good of the community than on who was right and who was wrong.

To be sure, the questions facing today's church are a bit more complex than whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols and of tremendous import. There are things on which we must take a stand, there are things we must do, so it is no more viable of an option to manage conflict with perpetual deference. Rather true empathy for those of opposing perspectives should inform our choices to defer or to stand firm.

Conflict is inevitable. It's healthy! The only thing that produces childlike squabbling among us is a lack of concern for one another, especially for those who differ in opinion. You'll notice that the material working out of Paul's call to the Corinthians in this case calls them away from what he considered sound reasoning. You

see, our greatest risk in times of conflict is not that we'll lose an argument, but that we'll lose one another. The higher calling for Paul was not to get the faith journey right, but to travel the faith journey *together*. And so it shall be for us.
Amen.