

“Love Above All”
January 28, 2024
Scripture: I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Have you ever known someone who has found a new diet or exercise regimen or supplement of some kind that’s really made a difference for their health or their outlook and they won’t stop talking about it? Every conversation, no matter how casual, somehow works its way around to this new thing they’re doing that’s changed their life. And...you need to do it, too! I get it. They’re excited about it and it’s really helped them and they want to share it. But sometimes it just feels relentless and kind of judgmental. They may not actually call you a bad or a lazy person, but you can hear it in their voice.

I think that might be something like what Paul is dealing with in this letter. He has introduced these people to a radically new way of thinking about themselves and the world. And imagine what it must have seemed like to the people around them. For the friends and families of this little Christian community in Corinth it probably felt like these people have lost their faith and been taken over by a cult. I can hear them just shocked by their loved ones behavior: “All our lives you’ve worshiped at the temple of Artemis or Apollo or Diana and now you’re turning your back on your friends and your family?” It was a big deal to commit themselves to Paul’s teachings and be a part of this new community. And what has Paul told them? “We’re your family now. You’re part of a new body.” Can you imagine the pressure some of these people were under to renounce that?

So, this problem Paul is talking about, eating meat offered to idols, runs deeper than just the issue. There are people in this community who are so liberated by these teachings that their lives are completely changed. Paul has told them the idols and the meals celebrated in those temples are meaningless, and some have really taken that to heart. But there are others who just can’t see it that way. They may have family ties for generations at the temple of Apollo and for them going back there to eat a meal feels like a betrayal. But apparently there are others who are deriding them for feeling that way. And they won’t shut up about it.

We may find it hard to put ourselves in the shoes of people who lived a couple thousand years ago. It seems like their issues are completely different from ours. But some dynamics never really change. People have always struggled with how to navigate community life. When everything is determined and set, with no room for self-expression or innovation, it can feel pretty comfortable. I think that’s why totalitarian regimes can be so popular. In a fascist state no one has to think about their choices or how to follow their impulses if those are different from what’s accepted. But once you sprinkle in a little democratic freedom, once you put the power of choice in the hands of the population, things get messy in a hurry. There’s a reason why places like Russia and Hungary have moved back toward autocracy. And there’s a reason why Roman society found these Christian enclaves threatening.

So, the conflicts that Paul is seeing develop in the community at Corinth aren’t all that surprising. I don’t think they were to him. I think he understood how hard it is for folks to adopt a new way of seeing the world and their place in it. But if that friction is allowed to continue, if

the folks who have fully abandoned their old understanding keep harping on the ones who are still struggling with it, the division between them will just get wider and wider. Resentment will set in, anger and hurt will start to define their life together. And Paul cannot have that. It's like when that friend or relative keeps hounding you about their new diet or exercise, trying to bring you around. They might mean well, but after a while you might decide you're better off not spending so much time with them.

Paul is desperate to keep this community together but he's not telling them to avoid certain topics. What he says is they must learn to approach one another with love and not judgment. As he says, "Knowledge puffs up but love builds up." That may sound like a bumper sticker, but it's shorthand for a principle he believes is inviolable. Later in the letter he'll make it clearer what he means by love when he writes, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." In other words, no matter how pure and absolute your beliefs might be, if you cannot convey them with love, they're useless. For Paul, love is the overarching value by which everything else is measured.

And he doesn't just leave it in the abstract. He says, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth." Sometimes the best sermons are the ones preached to the preacher. I hear Paul, in those words, including himself. He's as guilty as anyone else of failing to live up to the demands of love. We can see that what he's talking to them about goes way beyond who's eating what where. The question is can they talk about these things without the conversation descending into name-calling and accusations. Can they disagree lovingly?

That's a challenge we all face, in our families and in the church. There are differences of views among us. Some of them might be pretty minor such as the color of the bathrooms or whether or not to get new carpeting, but others go to the heart of who we are as a faith community. Do we display a "Black Lives Matter" sign on the lawn or do we advocate for undocumented immigrants? We don't all agree on those issues. But can we talk about them lovingly? And how do we cultivate an environment where our differences can be expressed without causing irreparable harm?

One conclusion we might take from Paul's words is to just seek the lowest common denominator and adjust our behaviors to accommodate that. So, we just avoid any conflict whatsoever. I don't believe that's useful, and given how argumentative Paul often was, I don't think he saw it as helpful, either. The real challenge is to love one another in spite of the real, deep differences we might have. And if we're willing to affirm the principle of love over all, that no matter what the issue might be, love is the standard we use to shape our views, then I don't think we can go very far wrong. If it comes down to a choice between being loving or being judgmental, I hope we err on the side of loving. I think that's what Paul tried to instill and I think it's what Jesus tried to embody.

There will always be things to argue about. And communities like ours will be called on more and more to take a stand on the issues of the day. We can't pretend we don't live in this world or that it doesn't affect us. But we can resolve to seek the most loving option in any conflict. We can resolve to engage one another in love and not judgment. And in that way allow the presence of Christ to be revealed in our life together and through our encounters with a world longing for love.

Amen