

“True Power”

Robert Montgomery
4th Sunday of Epiphany-January 29, 2012
First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

FIRST READING: Mark 1:21-28

They went to Caper'naum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

SECOND READING: I 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. 2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3 but anyone who loves God is known by him.

4 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." 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- 6 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.

7 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. 8 "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. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 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? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 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.

“You matter more than the color of the paint on the sanctuary wall.”

“You matter to me more than the kind of car you drive, or I drive.”

“You matter more to me than the political party you favor, or the college football team you follow, or if you follow or play any sports at all.”

Those really aren't big pronouncements, are they?

You'll notice that I didn't say, “You matter more to me than all the money I have in my bank account.” Or, “You matter to me more than life itself.”

No, Paul wasn't asking anyone in Corinth to give up all their money, or drop their social standing or identity, or twist themselves into pretzels or throw themselves in front of a speeding train.

No, all he wanted people to say to each other was, “You matter more to me than chopped liver.”

And sadly, he had to ask people to say that, pretty much verbatim.

The fact that he had reason to ever say it at all is troubling. The fact that he really *urgently* needed to say it, write it in a letter, write it in what became Holy Scripture—well, that's really troubling about the nature of human beings in our efforts, or non-efforts, to live with one another.

“Look, if I want to buy my chopped liver down at the local pagan temple, what skin off your nose, is it? And if I want a piece of chopped liver, what business is it of anyone else? If I want a slice of chopped liver, I

am going to have a piece of chopped liver, wherever I want to buy it, and heaven help the person who says otherwise.”

Now, that sounds like something I could say. In fact, that I might say. Maybe similar to some things I have said—and heard.

“Listen! You matter more to each other than chopped liver!” In a *The Message* sort of vernacular, that is what Paul is saying to his friends in I Corinthians 8.

The ancient world was not so different from us. To save time, trouble and money, it just made economic and practical sense to put the local butcher shop next to a big temple erected to some Roman or Greek gods. Since animals were going to be sacrificed, anyway, in the temple, why hassle with packaging or transportation troubles. Just open a butcher shop out front, right next to the banquet-style restaurant tables in the main temple hall.

And besides, it helps the marketing and advertising for both. People have always been willing to travel quite a ways for a good meal, or a good cut of meat.

So, the neat and cozy relationship thrived, with temples competing not just with their deities, but also their culinary skills and meat products.

“Come to worship, and go home with the best leg of lamb in town.” Why wouldn’t it work?

But it did give pause to anyone who might have started to have deep misgivings about the whole enterprise, temple, restaurant and meat market. That maybe something stinks about idolatry. That idolatry makes people very, very sick. And it can bring on a total collapse of one’s humanity.

Perhaps they are actually all wrapped up together in the same dirty paper—and to touch one is to touch them all. To be touched by one is to be touched by all. To be defiled by one is to be defiled by all.

So whether it is the temple itself, or the meat market or the restaurant which is also part of the temple functions, perhaps it is all the same food poisoning.

Which is where the Christians in Corinth come in, because, then as now, knowledge is power.

As we all know.

It always seems incredible to outside observers that human beings can get so upset over things like colors of paint, or where things will be stored, or where we sit.

But not only can we get upset. We often do.

And it is not just a mildly amusing self-awareness that follows. Instead, it can be an escalating hostility and distrust that cast doubts and accusations against the truly important things in us, namely, what we think, what we believe in, what we are all about as people. The conversation may have started over what to have for dinner, but if our trust among us as people is like a sand-castle, pretty but fragile, a little cold water splashed in the right place can cause the whole design to cave in on itself.

As it often has, then as now. Or, rather, now as then.

It all started with where you buy your meat. And where you eat on Monday.

Everyone knows, for example, that the best steak tartar may be in the Temple to Zeus, or if you want the best rack of lamb, that is clearly a trip to the butcher shop named, “Chez Diana.”

But like the old joke about Baptists meeting each other in the liquor store, it never seems to fail that you bump into “church folks” in the most awkward places. Which just might be the Temple of Zeus, with one of you on the way to the restaurant in the temple and the other to the butcher shop attached to the side.

Perhaps it was trying to offload the initial embarrassment first that led to some of the conflict, as the two church members met.

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, what are YOU doing here?”

“I’m just here to buy chopped liver, but you seem headed into the main temple dining hall. Don’t you know that is a pagan, idolatrous place in there?”

“No different from the butcher shop.”

“Oh yes, it is.”

Meanwhile, another of the people from church also walks up and sees both the meat shopper and the restaurant connoisseur, only in her mind, it seems confusing to see either of them here for any reason, except the reason that everyone else goes to the temple. It’s not to just buy food or eat a good meal, it’s to worship Diana, or Zeus or Jupiter, or maybe all three, along with any of a thousand and one other deities, competing for their own crowd of followers, who take not the food, but the religion very seriously indeed.

And for this person, idolatry is no unimportant matter. Idolatry led to abuse and to violence and to hatred and to using people for whatever purpose you wanted.

And for the moment, it sure could look for all the world, like these Christians are just “bread and wine Christians,” showing up for bread and wine at the church’s celebrations, the way they show up here for leg of lamb and chopped liver.

And even worse, this third, or second or only other, Christian who sees other Christians here at the temple, may be enticed back into thinking that Jesus is just another deity, another chance for a good meal and a religious party, no different from all the others. And lose hope and faith in the message of hope and love and faith that they have come to rely on.

“You are worth more to me than chopped liver, or the best baby back ribs in the world.”

That is Paul’s reminder.

Because what everyone will be tempted to do now that the issue has come up is to blame each other, for either being so “open-minded that his brain fell out” or “being so narrow-minded, the only thing that will fit up there is a sewing needle.”

Meanwhile, another person is just plainly overwhelmed, period. And decides to pack it in and just chank the whole “Jesus experience.”

“You are worth more than chopped liver—to God, to me and to each other,” Paul pleads.

“Knowledge is power,” but it tends to be selfish and self-serving, if it forgets to open the heart to love before it opens its mouth.

“Now we all know that whatever those people down at that temple think doesn’t matter to us. All I am after is a good pot roast. So, get over it.”

“But how are you going to convince people you know that being Christian is very, very different from these Greek and Roman gods, if they see you in the temple banquet hall during the worship, no matter how many times you say that you come here “only for the great mushrooms?”

There is simply no way that everyone is going to get their way, and that should guarantee a good WWF-style church throw-down to see who is right and who leaves limping, who has the best argument, and who is left with no place in the community, once the argument breaks the group up.

“You matter more than chopped liver,” Paul intones.

Remember what it means to be a Christian. Remember what the real point is. Remember the real power of being Christian. It’s all about love.

Knowledge figures in, to be sure. Two plus two doesn’t equal 5.

And there either are or aren’t other gods, and an idol really does have power, or it is just a chunk of wood or stone chiseled up to make it look like something when it is really just a chunk of wood or stone.

There aren’t other gods.

An idol is just a chunk of wood or stone. Nothing more.

Knowledge is important stuff, no doubt. It can save us from many problems, and it can help us solve many others.

But the “necessary knowledge” that Paul mentions is the fact that knowledge is always under the service of something, too. Either our egos or the power of love.

And for Paul, the true power is the power of love, or maybe the power of love coupled with faithful knowledge. For that is what Paul trusts, “knows” about God—God knows everything, but God’s knowledge is always in the service of love, not ego.

And so if we have the brains to figure out that “an idol is nothing” and that there “is no God but one,” and all the rest are figments of someone’s imagination—or worse—then, we ought to be able to figure out that as members of the bodies of Christ, we matter far more to each other than chopped liver, or where we buy our meat products, or what kind of food we eat at all.

In fact, we matter more to each other than “all the tea in China” and all the individual preferences I harbor in my mind and emotions about what I think is absolutely the most correct answer to everything.

This is the growing realization about what really does shock me the most about Paul.

To be honest, I am not sure I would have liked Paul’s personality.

His parents named him, “Saul,” and Saul was anything but a warm, likable guy, if you remember. And when you name your son after the first king of Israel, a man who was selfish and self-important, you are probably just asking for trouble as a parent.

My point is that I don't think Paul was a shrinking violet, or even much of a very kind or polite man prior to the Damascus Road.

He seems, in fact, to have believed that he and God are in total agreement about everything, and anything you might disagree with him about would be the same—in his view—as disagreeing with God.

He is, in fact, so cold and locked into his own point of view that he watches a man named Stephen being stoned to death, and he enjoys each rock's impact. And he all but says, "Praise the Lord," as each hits, and a human life is extinguished in front of him.

He is also very comfortable with throwing people in prison, with a potential stoning sentence for each one of them—men, women, children—all because they disagree with his religious views.

Which, of course, are all that matter, because Saul is so convinced that he is absolutely right.

But this is the same man—a man who I think was crusty and abrupt and intellectually bruising if not outright domineering—this the same man who can already sense the words of I Corinthians 13 starting to rise up in him.

"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Where did that come from?

This is not Saul the Pharisee or Paul the persecutor or Paul the person who insists that it's his way or the prison way...no, there is something new in Paul. It's the power of love. True power.

Love is the only power that can cast out evil.

Love is the only power that can turn Paul from a cruel religious man into an apostle of Jesus Christ.

And now words like "love," and "wounded" and "for whom Christ died," are now in this man's vocabulary. **THIS MAN'S!**

Anything that could change Saul the Self-Important and Brutal and Paul the Professional Debater into Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ, "who loved us and gave himself for us..."

That is true power.

And that power is love.

The love of God, the God of all power and knowledge, who, above all else, loves us, at the cost of God's own heart in Jesus Christ.

Love is the greatest power in the world, for "God is love."

It is not a weak or self-serving love, a love that is groveling or ingratiating. It is love, a determination to see things set right among people and with their God, and to pursue the good in ways that are also good, filled with love, which is both courageous and sacrificial.

Paul is an unlikely advocate for love, much less for the God of love in the narrative of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

His own ideas are now in the service of love, not his own power or his own preferences and thoughts.

And so with us, we know that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has entered our presence when we matter to each other, more than our own preferences or our own convictions about how absolutely right we are sure we are.

No, love takes the other into account, just as God did with us, on our tiny, insignificant, invisible planet. Earth would never appear on any map of the universe, except that God loves us.

And the Good News is that God does love us, and knows us and we discover what the Scriptures have always said, that the things that are eternal cannot be bought in a store or stored in a vault, deposited in a bank account.

But the delight is the discovery that what is truly eternal can never be taken away, either. And having discovered the power and the reality of love, love that flows from God, we realize what the true power is.

And the real power is the love of God in Jesus Christ that teaches us and pulls us toward the reality of being brothers and sisters with each other, now and forever.

For it is also true in God's universe that love never ends.

Thanks be to God. Amen.