

Liberty or Servanthood? Knowledge or Love?

Here at the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, we have a long, strong history of careful thinking. If you're not sure what I mean, just go to the Faith and Issues Sunday School class, or the Empowerers, or any of our adult Sunday School classes. Intellectual rigor is part of our personality, our identity, our DNA. We like to question things, whether it's the parting of the Red Sea, or the virgin birth, what it means to turn the other cheek, or what gender God is. We prefer to read the Bible critically, rather than literally. We generally don't care much for pat answers, or for a faith that is simplistic.

I would even go so far as to say that the faith we claim at Lorraine Avenue is for many of us a liberating faith. We read and discuss books like *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus*. We refer to God as She as well as He. We have a pretty pointed Welcome Statement. We can't imagine being able to find a better church, where we feel we fit in, even with (or even, especially with) our questions and doubts and progressive political views, along with our radical, wide open understanding of the gospel. We feel liberated from the much more conservative Christianity we grew up with. And we don't want to go back.

If you identify with what I'm saying, then you should also be able to identify with the folks down the road at the Corinthian Mennonite Church. Or at least, some of them. A faction of them.

Paul was their church-planting pastor, but was no longer living in Corinth. And so this faction had been exchanging letters back and forth with Paul. They had lots of questions about this new religion to which Paul had introduced them, this new understanding of God that had liberated them from beliefs that seemed archaic, backwards, unnecessary. Beliefs like . . . it was wrong to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Perhaps a word of explanation would be helpful. The Greek city of Corinth in the first century CE was largely a pagan city. Which meant that there were lots of temples scattered throughout the city, devoted to the worship of various idols, representing pagan gods (small g). It was common practice to sacrifice animals to these idols as a way to earn the favor of their gods, and then to eat the meat from the animals, either right there in the temple, or by purchasing it in the marketplace, where the meat was eventually taken.

But for the Jews living in Corinth, this was a problem. They believed that according to their Bible, their Torah, it was a sin to eat this meat, since it had been sacrificed to pagan idols. Some even believed it was a sin to associate with others who were eating this meat.

But then, along comes Paul. And Paul tells them about Jesus Christ, who had replaced the Torah with a new religion that was focused on grace. It didn't matter what they ate. What mattered was what was in their hearts. How liberating that was, to be able to eat the meat that had been sacrificed to idols! Because, after all, it was just meat. And the idols were just idols. And there was only one God (capital G). Leg of lamb, anyone?

But there were some in the Corinthian Christian Church who still believed it was a sin to eat meat that had been sacrificed in the pagan temples. They hadn't been able to let go of that belief. It was too engrained, too foundational to their faith. Okay, so where did this leave our

more enlightened and liberated faction? Why should they be concerned about the simplistic beliefs of their more conservative colleagues? To each his own, right? Any anyway, now that we've been liberated by the gospel of Christ, we're certainly not going to go backwards. That would be a sin, wouldn't it? To deny the gospel?

This apparently was one of the issues they included in their letter to Paul. We don't have their letter. But we do have Paul's reply.

Paul begins by agreeing with them. "It is not a sin against God to eat meat sacrificed in the temple to an idol. Because those idols aren't real. Only the risen Christ is real. Only the grace of God is real. What you write is true.

But, not everyone in your congregation feels as free and liberated as you. What if, in your eating this meat, you offend them? Or confuse them? Or tempt them? What if, being tempted, they eat also, and then afterwards feel the weight and shame and failure of their own perceived sin? You would be responsible for that sin. Or to put it differently, you would have sinned against them. Which means, you would have sinned against Christ.

So as it turns out, this passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians isn't really about eating meat sacrificed to idols. It's about idolatry in a much larger sense. A much more enlightened, big picture sense. An idol isn't only a statue of some pagan god, which many who haven't met Christ yet worship in vain. An idol is anything we place as more important than the grace of Christ, the love of Christ, the body of Christ. Our enlightened beliefs themselves can be an idol. Our pacifism can be an idol. Our progressive social views can be an idol. Our love for four-part hymn singing (and concomitant disdain for praise and worship songs) can be an idol.

We could simplify Paul's point by saying this: if we do anything that offends someone else, even if we ourselves don't believe it to be wrong, then it is still wrong. This could apply, for example, to the use of profanity. It could also apply to drinking alcohol, particularly in the presence of a recovering alcoholic who is trying to quit.

For those of us who prefer broader, big-picture principles to simplified statements of right and wrong, try this. In the church, relationships matter more than beliefs. In fact, relationships matter more than pretty much anything else, including knowledge, education, or personal conviction. The opinions of others matter more than my own. Listening to others matters more than me being right. Servanthood matters more than liberty. Love is more important than enlightenment.

In a church that prizes enlightenment as highly as ours that's going to be tough. Same goes for our progressive theology, our liberal politics, and yes, even what we eat. Because none of these matter more than the other person in our midst, whoever they may be.

Tofu, anyone?

Amen.