

"The Spirit of Community"  
January 31, 2021; 9:00 am  
I Corinthians 8:1-13  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

**Food Offered to Idols**

**8** Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup> Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; <sup>3</sup> but anyone who loves God is known by him.

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

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> "Food will not bring us close to God."<sup>[a]</sup> We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. <sup>9</sup> But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>12</sup> But when you thus sin against members of your family,<sup>[c]</sup> and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling,<sup>[d]</sup> I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them<sup>[e]</sup> to fall.

**I. MEANWHILE IN CORINTH, 1<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

What on earth is going on over yonder in Corinth?

What is Paul talking about—meat sacrificed to idols?

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up? Doesn't everybody know that? "Food will not bring us closer to God?" "What you eat doesn't matter that much, but I'm gonna be a vegetarian, just in case?"

Yep. This is one of those passages from the Bible that sure seems like it doesn't have anything to do with US and our faith journey. Heck! We can't even understand what Paul is talking about, much less get why it's in the scripture. And, why it's in our scripture for our worship today. Sure hope that preacher can make some sense out of it! Is it time for Coffee Hour yet?

Well, we're not going to delve too-deep into this today, but we can learn why it's here and why it matters. And matters on this day when we celebrate our church, hold our annual meeting, and celebrate what it means to be in Community. Community as Church, live *in* a Spirit of Community—Be the Church—the Body of Christ.

We'll start with what it's not.

This is not a passage that can be taken out of context and used as a weapon or even an argument against carnivores! It's not about whether a follower of Christ should be a vegan, or a vegetarian, or a free-falling carnivore.

It's also not about whether the bible says that we should use grape juice or wine for Communion. Or whether it's okay to drink wine at all!

It's about how we live and move and breathe together in the Spirit of Christ, as we go about figuring out how to live, serve and love in community.

The Church at Corinth was struggling with a lot of "isms." Camps. Schools of Thought. What were the "rules" of this new faith circle? Did they have to follow all the rules of Judaism, or could they throw *everything* out because of Freedom in Christ? To today's debate, was it okay to eat meat that might have been sacrificed to idols at the pagan temple next door? If they weren't pagan anymore, what did it matter? But, what if someone was struggling with their new faith and feeling pulled back into their old life, and seeing their fellow Christians eat meat from the idols, they might just give into temptation?

A modern-day example that *kinda* fits might be from a church camp where I served on staff years ago. We were all fine with having a little wine or beer around—not around the youth campers, of course. We didn't think drinking alcohol was, in itself, a moral or faith issue—even those of us who were raised Baptist, and had that message drilled into us. But the caretaker at the camp, a lovely, faithful older gentleman, did have a struggle with alcohol. So, out of love and compassion, respect and concern for him, we had a camp-wide policy and put aside our own desires to imbibe on campus. We didn't want to make life harder for him and even have it on the premises.

There you have the gist of this strange passage and Paul's trying to make a point. It's really that simple. "What are the essentials? What are not? How do you

live in community in the most selfless, supportive way, and act out of Love?

Set aside all your various opinions and beliefs and philosophies about what's right and wrong. What are "the rules" and what's allowed. How do you look—not for the LDC but the HCG. Not the Lowest Common Denominator but the—Highest Common Good?

If Paul were quoted today, he might also say:

*"Just because you can, doesn't mean you should!"*

## **II. NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM TODAY!**

And, to our starting point—is that really so different from today? If this sounds eerily familiar—the phrases ringing out from this passage—it might just be echoing what we're hearing today.

"Individual freedom, religious freedom, liberties, rights!" These are the clarion call in our day! Are they not? This is a direct parallel to what was happening in Corinth, that Paul is responding to in a lot of his letters in the New Testament. FREEDOM! (Yes, imagine Braveheart, pounding his chest and bellowing across the Scottish moors!)

We are as stuck in these divides and differences in our day as the Corinthians were in Paul's. "But I follow Christ, and have Freedom in Christ. Why do I have to follow the rules?! It's not a problem for ME—and isn't this a free country?"

When you hear those arguments, that's a good time to go back to that ever-faithful bedrock question: "What Would Jesus Do?"

What's really being questioned here? In Corinth and in our day? When we question "the rules" and also categorize others as "weak in their faith?" As if that's up to us to decide. It's an important question.

Rev. Ray Stedman puts it well: "In many situations today, where arguments arise over these kinds of things, it is not a question of somebody's conscience being weak; it is a question of somebody's prejudices being irritated."

### **III. ESSENTIALS OF COMMUNITY**

What *really* matters in community? *Community!* Belonging. Welcoming everyone who welcomes everyone else. Period. Paul would say the answer to that question of what's essential for a spirit of community to prevail is not deciding which camps are right and which dogma to follow. But, to have a Spirit of Community.

That really gets away from and above all the petty squabbles and identity questions—for a congregation or any community.

Bruce Epperly reminds us that to find the spirit of community means to look at our individual life choices as well as our communal decisions.

"Paul's words in a nutshell: "Don't get in the way of other peoples' spiritual growth to satisfy your own need to be orthodox or theologically correct. Don't let your own liberalism *or* latitude on certain rules harm those whose scruples differ from your own!"

Our calling is to be faithful in our relationships. Our public and relational lifestyle is not individualistic but *communal* in nature. My life is not solely my own. In an *interdependent* universe and in the systems of family and church, it shapes the realities of others.

"Paul's words to the Corinthians have to be read in light of his image of the **Body of Christ**. Our relationship choices bring health and illness to the body as a whole. Our attentiveness to God enables our *lives to speak for God*."

### **IV. OUR CHURCH—DANGEROUS!**

I had this passage in mind this week when I heard of a conversation where our beloved community, CUCC, was brought up. It seems, because we are known to be "pro-something" or "anti-something" that we are described as "dangerous!"

Wow. Really? Hmm. I wonder How Jesus would describe us? I wonder if Jesus was described as dangerous?! The more I pondered this, I thought: Maybe we're doing something *right*.

Perhaps we might consider it a blessing that word on the street is that we, CUCC, are truly pro-life and not just "pro-birth." That Extravagant Welcome means just *that*. That we truly are "pro-love--of all kinds of love that God gives."

That we are known for honoring the dignity and wellness of every person, and trying diligently to “See no Stranger” as Valarie Kaur puts it so eloquently. I think I’d call that “Good trouble!” A la John Lewis and Jesus Christ, if I had to put a name to it.

When asked: What do you stand for? What’s your church about? What do you answer? Pro-this or anti-this or this wing or that. Political, partisan, neutral, none? Biblical (literal or non-literal), traditional, contemporary. Those are all just labels. Do you welcome Democrats? Republicans? Left-wingers, right-wingers? Catholics, Protestants, continuing or recovering? Who is truly welcome here?

“We welcome everyone who welcomes everyone else!”

Remember: Others’ attempts to put you or your community into boxes are just that—attempts. Pigeon-holing others is a way we try to deal with our own prejudices. Not truly a way to open our minds and hearts and seek greater understanding.

Categories or labels are imposed from without—they don’t have to be accept. Christ tells us who we are: Beloved Community. Body of Christ.

Free in Christ to love God, neighbor and self *unconditionally!*

We welcome everyone who welcomes everyone else. Come as you are. We won’t try to change you. We will endeavor to journey with you, as we all seek to follow Jesus, growing, changing and expanding our knowledge and love together.

If you are looking for a group to affirm your prejudices and generalized categorizing of others, then you are in the wrong place. If you are looking for a “side” to be on, then come and see Jesus’ side. The Side of the poor, outcast, marginalized, least of these misfits. The ones Jesus hung out with!

### STUMBLING BLOCK

Stumbling blocks can also mean inaction. If we don’t make it clear what we stand for as a congregation, how might that be a stumbling block to those who need to hear LOUD and clear that they are truly welcome. That persons can bring their whole selves. That we really mean we welcome all—body and soul?

If you are in the mainstream of society—the dominant race and social class, you might not realize how vitally important this is. Every church SAYS it’s welcoming and friendly. Really! They ALL do! But once inside, the subtle or not-so-subtle attempts to change people not in the mainstream begin like an epidemic.

If you don’t believe me, listen to some folk’s stories about how they found “welcome” to be anything but.

### **V. PAUL—THE HOW—CHOOSE LOVE**

What would Paul say to us in our century, in our place?

Choose Love.

Choose quality of relationships and depth of generosity.

Start with remembering how much God has shown love to you, and then extend that to others.

Ray Stedman:

If you love God you are responding to the love of God for you. Do not try to force yourself to think of somebody else. Give yourself to reviewing what God has already done for you. Think of the thousand times a day he has manifested love and concern and faithfulness for you. It will begin to make you feel humbly grateful. When you do this you will then be able to recognize that other people need to be treated with patience as God treats you, and begin to understand their point of view.

Love is Still the Way—our banner. That’s what it means. What Paul said. Don’t get bogged down in petty squabbles, are you’re figuring out how to live in peaceful community together. It’s now about beliefs, knowledge, dogma, or even freedom. It’s about one thing: LOVE.

*Love is still the way*—always has been! If you want to know what “love” means to Paul, hop ahead 5 chapters to I Corinthians 13 and see how love is so much more than a sentimental emotion, but an action, a worldview, a bedrock foundation of life and faith.

## **VI. WHAT DOES WIDE WELCOME MEAN?**

Our sister church, over yonder in Parker, welcomed three new members a couple weeks back! Yes, even in COVID closure—even though they’ve been doing only zoom worship for almost a year! New folks are coming into the circle and wanting to belong!

I loved that this event happened, but also the spirit of welcome and the words Tracey used. The theme song from Cheers echoes in my mind! “Where everybody knows your name. And they’re always glad you came!

So, I adapted them for us. For today, we welcome each of us anew into our circle, as we commit to a new year in our church and its fellowship. This is a time to “renew our covenant” and commit to belong.

*Jesus words invite us:*

*Come and see.* Jesus says to Philip and Nathanael, *Be with me. Be one of us. See how God will be revealed to you through me.*

We welcome you all as our siblings in Christ not so much with a call to mission as an *invitation to your own epiphany*. This is your own opportunity for awakening—or perhaps *re-awakening* to the loving presence of God in your life.

We welcome you as today’s disciples of Jesus, not because of what value you can bring to the church in terms of your skill-set, your money, or your pedigree, but because, like all the rest of us you see across the Zoom screens, you are a seeker, the Beloved in whom God is already unconditionally pleased.

Our church family will be stronger and enriched by your presence and partnership. You will give to the church of your ministry heart—your time, your talent, and your support, because you *want to*, not because you have to. You are not being drafted into forced service; you are being ushered instead to the head of the line where Jesus will whisper in your ear as was once whispered in his, *Come and See*.

Welcome to this imperfect, at times happy mess, our church family that is extending today our virtual hugs to you, our CUCC community heart that will beat in time now with yours, our blessed and beloved church asking for and extending grace always in all things.

When you now look into the face of God revealed in CUCC, you will see your own reflection added to all of ours, the collective reflection of God's unconditional love.

## **VII. BLESSED CHOICE TO BE COMMUNITY**

What's our messaging? What is the spirit of community that we exude? What is the dangerous message of extravagant, unconditional love that roars out, shines forth as a beacon to our local and wider world?

That we "Talk the talk and walk the walk?" That Body Language matters. What's the language of the Body of Christ? Messaging matters. That's what Paul is trying to say—to Corinth and to us.

Those banners outside say a lot! They make some people uncomfortable. To others, they are a lifeline on a stormy sea! Love, not dogma. True Welcome. Not just lip-service.

That we remember the wise words of Mother Theresa: *"We can do no great things; only small things with great Love!"*

John Pavlovitz reminds us that choosing to live in community changes our lives:

"Community fills in the holes we have, placing us alongside people whose gifts, passions and personalities become our counterpoint. We're able to see ourselves as part of something much greater than our isolated story. You're undoubtedly really good at some things, and perhaps less spectacular elsewhere.

Living and working and dreaming in community means you'll find people who shore up the things that

are shaky in you. Sometimes the greatest thing about true community is having people close to you who can see the things in you that you can't see, who can nudge you past a place of stuckness, who (depending on what you need in the moment) **give you a hug around the neck or a kick in the behind.**"

(Pavlovitz, *"Hope and Other Superpowers"* p. 204)

How blessed are we to have one another. This church family—serving and loving together in Christ's name. Serving not only ourselves, but for the good and uplifting spirit of the whole community and beyond!

As we celebrate our annual meeting and celebrate launching into a vital and vibrant new year as church—as a Beloved Community.

Celebrate, CUCC! Because we have love *and* knowledge. At the end of the day, we can lie down on our beds, knowing we have chosen to be a blessing. Knowing deep down, that this town, this valley and this world would not be the same place whatsoever if this church did not exist. For 140 years, and going strong for many, many more! Amen.