

“From What I heard”

A reflection by rev. dr. thom bower  
For the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany  
January 31, 2021

Based on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

*As I have studied this passage, I find the English translations miss some nuances in Greek. What follows is are my changes to the Common English Bible highlighted.*

Now concerning meat that has been sacrificed to a false god: We discern that we all have understanding. Understanding makes people arrogant, while love builds people up.<sup>2</sup>If anyone assesses they understand something, they don't yet discern as much as they should understand.<sup>3</sup>But if someone loves God, then they are understood by God.

<sup>4</sup>So concerning the actual food involved in these sacrifices to false gods, we discern that a false god isn't anything in this world, and that there is no God except for the one God. <sup>5</sup>Granted, there are so-called “gods,” in heaven and on the earth, as there are many gods and many lords. <sup>6</sup>However, for us believers,

*There is one God the Father.*

*All things come from him, and we belong to him.*

*And there is one Lord Jesus Christ.*

*All things exist through him, and we live through him.*

<sup>7</sup>But not everybody understands this. Some are eating this food as though it really is food sacrificed to a real idol, because they were used to idol worship until now. Their ability to discern is weak because it has been damaged. <sup>8</sup>Food won't bring us close to God. We're not missing out if we don't eat, and we don't have any advantage if we do eat.

<sup>9</sup>But watch out or else this freedom of yours might be a problem for those who are weak. <sup>10</sup>Suppose someone sees you (the person who has understanding) eating in an idol's temple. Won't the person with a weak ability to discern be encouraged to eat the meat sacrificed to false gods? <sup>11</sup>The weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed by your understanding <sup>12</sup>You sin against Christ if you sin against your brothers and

sisters and hurt their weak ability to discern this way. <sup>13</sup>This is why, if food causes the downfall of my brother or sister, I won't eat meat ever again, or else I may cause my brother or sister to fall.

The story as I heard it is those Greek temples would gather up the foodstuffs left in in the temples, some at the base of statues and some on the altars dedicated to their gods. Some of that food was used to feed people who worked in the temples, and some was sold to the public. Hey, its an additional revenue stream for the temple and, because they were selective to whom they sold, a way for the poor to get some meat.

What I also heard is that the church in Corinth, like so many other churches, gathered for regular meals, maybe weekly, maybe daily. Most of this was done potluck-style: everybody bring what you can and we'll share. Now maybe some people bought meat from the temple to bring to the potluck. Maybe someone planning these church meals went to the temple and bought meat there because it was cheaper than going to a butcher.

So what I heard was that some people in the Corinthian church knowing the meat had come from a Greek temple said some things like "Now we eat like gods" or "If we eat food offered to gods then we must be gods." It is hard to tell if they were joking or if they were serious. But because some of the people saying those things used to be really religious in the Greek temples, it made some other people wonder if the first group had really become a Christ follower or if they were still worshipping the Greek gods.

So then, at least the way it was told to me, others refused to eat the meat just because it had previously been used in a religious ritual as an offering to the Greek gods. "We believe in one God, how can we then participate in a system that promotes belief in many gods?" "When we purchase food from those temples, which is as good as giving them a donation."

And then I heard some other folk said, "Look, we don't believe in other gods so what does it matter how others treated this food. It is still good to eat, it hasn't changed in some magical way just because it sat on an altar in

another temple. Since those gods do not exist, then their altar is a table like any other table.”

“Well it does matter,” some people said – or so I heard it. “If some people now feel as though they are the god-like recipients of food because it had been an offering even to gods that don’t exist, then it is a problem. We are human, God is God, we are not God, and we should not even pretend to be like God.”

All of this because some people brought meat to a potluck.

What I also heard is then a bunch of people started writing to Paul. No, I don’t mean they got together to write, I mean they each individually contacted the apostle with their own complaints about anyone who disagreed. I also heard that other people who know Paul, people who had just passed through Corinth, they went and told Paul what they saw happening in the church – no, not like tattle-tales, more like reports on church health.

From what I understand, that’s why Paul wrote a letter to the church of Corinth. And Paul basically says, some of you understand this situation one way and others understand it another way, and no one is paying attention to what keeps you together in Christ’s name. He said that because this food was given to a false god, it is still regular food. But how would people perceive your meal if you sat down in those Greek temples and ate your meal there? Would it cause anyone to question your integrity as a Christ follower? Don’t try the ol’ routine “If they think that they are simpleminded”: if your acts interfere with how they understand Christ, then stop acting that way.

Paul seems to be trying to address three things. The presenting issue is eating meat. Then there’s the issue of some people claiming to know better than other people. (You know how important it is to Greeks that they know something.) That’s where Paul shifts the discussion to the third: It isn’t about what you know; it is about discerning. Not like a discerning palate choosing the better wine, no: discerning how to love as a Christ follower. We need to discern how as a church how we gather and use our resources

so that when others watch us they will see us acting as disciplined Christ followers.

We have to act from our discernment so no one gets the wrong idea about our freedom as Christ followers: we are free to love, but that means we are also disciplined to love. Paul says if an action like eating meat – and he means eating meat anytime, not just at the church potlucks – if eating meat confuses someone about being a Christ follower, then Paul says he won't eat meat ever again.

What's that? No, I don't know if Paul was a vegetarian or a vegan or a piscetarian. I don't know if he was describing his actual practice or a hypothetical one. That's not the point: the point is Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection have set us free – not free to do just as we please but free to the discipline of loving others as a church so they may love God and be known by God.

From what I heard, it seems the folk who made up the church in Corinth had a really hard time with that. They thought freedom in Christ meant permission for all sorts of other activities. They really didn't want to be disciplined as disciples.

I guess that is the really difficult part of this being a Christ follower. It's not about me, it's not about you, it's our shared identity in Christ. Even when we understand differently, even when we discern differently, even if we think someone else is misinformed or just doesn't understand, we need to discern how to love in community.

You know what? If all of this is about loving other because God loved us first, then the ways we interact with each other demonstrates our commitment to loving in God's way. Yeah, even when they bring things to potluck that we do not like.

## **Morning Prayer<sup>i</sup>**

We come to you, wondrous God,  
thankful for the varied gifts of creation.

Amid these wintry days  
we look ahead to the spring-time plants  
which will draw upon the  
moisture the ground receives today.

As we endure gusting winds,  
we marvel at the turning of our planet.

Remind us that there are  
even more marvelous gifts  
you have to yet to reveal to us.

As we walk between piles of snow,  
we are moved to prayers of concern for  
those who are exposed to the elements.

Protect first responders.

Protect those who do not have adequate shelter.

Nourish those whose meals are insufficient.

Liberating God,  
we pray for those who suffer under  
the oppressive abuse of authority –  
citizens in police states,  
the disappeared,  
abused children and vulnerable ones.

Bring your healing, O God.

We pray for those who struggle daily because of  
mental and physical illness,  
debilitating pain, trauma, or other ailments.

Bring your healing, O God.

We pray for those who experience alienation –  
immigrants,  
asylum seekers,  
refugees,  
children and the aged,  
those who have been marginalized and silenced  
for whatever reason.

Bring your healing, O God.

O God, your healing power repels all  
that stands between communion  
with you and others.

By your loving hand,  
we are drawn into a community of wholeness.

Bring your healing, O God.

Send your divine spirit so we may grow in wisdom,  
Honing our skills for discerning  
how to discipline ourselves  
to act in greater love,  
to conduct healthier communications,  
to demonstrate our freedom in you  
always tempered by living in community  
bearing the name as Christ followers.

\*We ask for ourselves an encounter with  
your spirit that begins some essential transformation –  
not something entertaining  
or interesting  
or even thoughtful,  
but something awesome,

inspiring,  
something that draws out our real selves.  
Speak to our spirits  
and change us inside in ways that matter so that we  
burn and  
tremble and  
heal and  
explode with  
tears and  
laughter and  
screams  
in a love that throbs and dares dangerous deeds.  
Let something essential and joyous happen  
within us that encourages hope and faith to bloom  
with surging of awareness of  
how precious each moment is,  
that now – not the next time –  
is the occasion  
to speak the truth in love  
to step forward against injustice  
to leap and whirl with our neighbor  
to utter the tender words  
thank you  
I love you  
We are servants of Christ.

Bring your healing God,  
so we may be your beloved community of disciples,  
praying as Jesus taught:

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<sup>1</sup> The first half of this prayer is adapted from Seasons of the Spirit 2009. The asterisk begins an adaptation of "Let Something Essential Happen to Me" by Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace*, (86-7).