

SERMON - Meat-fare (Judgment) Sunday - February 11, 2018

St. Paul's epistle which we heard today is about eating meat offered to idols versus love of neighbor. In a wider spectrum, it is also about how to live a Christian life in a society that is pagan and even openly hostile to the Christian way of life. In ancient Corinth during the time of St. Paul, the best way to get a good steak dinner was to buy the meat that was sacrificed to idols. You could buy it in the market place or feast on it in a banquet room connected to or near the pagan temple. The temples and these banquet halls were replete with a plethora of temple prostitutes. Plenty of wine was served, which often led to drunkenness and sexual orgies. For obvious reasons St. Paul admonished the Christians to no longer frequent these so-called restaurants. Some of the Christians whined and complained because they didn't want to give up their filet mignon. They pridefully thought of themselves as "mature" and possessing high spiritual knowledge and wisdom. They felt that since they knew that pagan worship was false and that pagan idols were not true gods, there should be no problem in eating some of the meat that was offered in the pagan temple. Additionally, since the pagan worship is false, they reasoned that the meat offered is really no different than any other meat. Paul is concerned that some with weaker consciences may see and imitate the Christians who are eating meat at the pagan temples. This could potentially become a problem if these "weaker" Christians do not just eat the meat, but also fall back into familiar practices and enter into pagan worship. Thus the actions of those "possessing knowledge" may become an occasion of sin for weaker members in the community. In chapter 3 of this epistle Paul calls on the Christians to build up the church and the Christian community. But the actions of those who rely on their so-called "knowledge" regarding eating meat sacrificed to idols are actually tearing down the community rather than building it up. This was a very selfish attitude in which these proud Christians were only concerned about themselves and their so-called "rights" instead of making it their priority to building up others in the community. The heart of the problem in this epistle is not so much the eating of food offered to idols as it is the selfish pride of those who act with no regard or charity toward their brothers and sisters in Christ. The example of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself is very different than these selfish Corinthian Christians. In contrast, Jesus Christ "emptied Himself...humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6,8). Christ died for us when we were "helpless" (weak; see Romans 5:6). Paul makes a stinging comparison between the Corinthians and Christ when in 1 Corinthians 8:11 he says that the Corinthians are destroying the weak man by their knowledge, as compared to Christ who died for this weak brother.

In reflecting on today's epistle, what are some of the things that we claim as "rights" that we put on a higher level than love of our fellow Christians? In today's epistle Paul is calling not only on the Corinthians but on us to act in such a way as to be good examples and encourage our brothers and sisters to live in holiness. Being a good example to others involves sacrifice, giving of ourselves, and it sometimes means giving up something that we desire. There is no better way to imitate our Lord and to save our own souls than to be giving in order to love our brother more than we love ourselves. These unselfish sacrificial acts of love and kindness are what preserves and solidifies marriages, families, churches, communities and all human relationships. Oneness is something we work toward, yet it is a gift from God. God makes oneness happen when people love and care more about each other than about themselves. This is what it means to love like Christ. In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, St. Paul gives us the best definition of love: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." May God help us to follow and be obedient to St. Paul's teaching today, and may we, with God's help, make love of neighbor the main priority in our lives. Amen.