

*For the people of St. Philip's
4 Epiphany, Year B
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I Corinthians 8:1-13
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True story: there were once some missionaries in the Philippines who set up a croquet game in their front yard. Several of their Agta Negrito neighbors became interested and wanted to join the fun. The missionaries explained the game and started them out, each with a mallet and a ball. As the game progressed, the opportunity came for one of the players to take advantage of another by knocking that person's ball out of the court. A missionary explained the procedure, but his advice only puzzled his Philipino friend. "Why would I want to knock his ball out of the court?" he asked. "So you will be the one to win!" a missionary said. The short-statured man, clad only in a loin cloth, shook his head in bewilderment. His "civilized" neighbor was suggesting something absurdly uncivil. Competition is generally ruled out in a hunting gathering society, where people survive, not by competing with one another, but by working together.

The game continued, but nobody followed the missionaries' advice. When a player successfully got through all the wickets, the game was not over for him. He went back and gave aid and advice to his fellows. As the final player moved toward the last wicket, the affair was still very much a team effort. And finally, when the last wicket was played, the "team" shouted happily, "We won!" "We won!" (p 123) Illustrations Unlimited).

Can you imagine what would have happened if those missionaries had tried to teach their neighbors the rules for tonight's Super Bowl game!!!

I think the apostle Paul would smile at this story. Today we read from his first letter to the Corinthians, one of the earliest Christian communities. In fact, back when this letter was written, I don't think the term Christian had even come into use. Paul had his work cut out for him with this group. In this first letter, Paul covers a number of practical situations: everything from what to do about a man who is living with his stepmother, to how best to arrange one's hair when prophesying in church, to what food shall we eat?

The missionaries teaching their neighbors how to play a game knew the correct rules, but they did not impose their rules on their indigenous neighbors. The missionaries explained their rules once, but then they stepped back and observed as their neighbors acted in accordance with their own wisdom. Thankfully the missionaries didn't take the mallets away and insist that everyone play right or not at all. To do so would have been counter-productive, it would have oppressed the cultural values of those with whom they were living in community. Even though the missionaries may have had knowledge of the rules of the game, the question would have hung in the air, "who sets the rules?"

In our epistle reading today Paul is trying to bring an end to the confusion around what folks ought to do with food that has been sacrificed to idols

Apparently, there were people in the Corinthian community who believed that food sacrificed to an idol was untouchable, but there is only one God in Paul's mind, and that is the Lord. Therefore the food that was being sacrificed to idols was really just food being sacrificed to nothing.

So Paul thinks the food given for sacrifice could be eaten just like any other food, but Paul stresses to his friends in Corinth that they need to be very careful. We all need to be careful. Determining how we should act in a given situation is not just a matter of knowing what is

right or customary. We must always take into account how our actions will affect the life and growth of other people.

My favorite verse in this chapter reads, "Knowledge puffs up but love builds up." I kept that verse close to me in seminary. Knowledge is good, important, and something to strive for, but knowledge without compassion is dangerous. Our goal as Christians is to know God—not to know about God. Any knowledge gained will not automatically bring us any closer to God. The point of the game is how we use our knowledge. Do we have to be the one to set the rules, or is it enough to be considerate of all the players.

Paul's message to followers in Corinth was this: let love guide you, because great minds DON'T think alike.

We will never live in a world where we all agree on the rules of the game, and that's a good thing. None of us knows all there is to know, thanks be to God. We need to play well together. Our challenge, always, is to let love inform us before we act.

Corinth was a church with many, many problems. And one of the biggest problems was that it had members who thought they knew all the rules of the game. Paul reminds them (and us) that while knowing so much might seem like a good thing, it can lead to pride which is contrary to Jesus' call to walk humbly with him. A quest for knowledge that is not tempered with love will certainly lead to conflict and the destruction of the church. Instead Paul tells the people here and elsewhere in this letter that the better way is always love first. Love builds up rather than destroys. Love is more concerned with the other. Love is the bond that holds a church together. Love holds us all together.

It's not about the food, it's not about the rules about food. It's about love. It's always about love. God is love. Paul writes about this gift of love that God has given us through Jesus Christ and how, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's love works through us..1 Corinthians 13, paraphrased.

If I speak with great eloquence, conviction and beauty, but do so without love, my words are little more than bombastic bellowing or a grating noise.

And though I have the power to speak for God and understand every mystery and comprehend all knowledge, and if I have all the faith that could move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

And though I give away everything I possess, and even if I offer my own body as a sacrifice to the flames of fire, but have not love, I have gained nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind. Love does not envy, love is not arrogant or proud. It does not act unseemly; it is not self-seeking, not easily provoked, and does not dwell on evil. It does not rejoice at injustice, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, has faith in all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

As for prophecies, they will vanish away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it too will end. For now we know in part and prophesy in part, but when all is brought to completion, then all that is partial will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I put away childish ways. For now we see as in a mirror darkened and distorted, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know even as I am fully known.

And so it is that faith, hope and love live and dwell within us, these three; but the greatest of these is love.