

Someone Else's Sacrifice in Someone Else's Temple I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Introduction

Scholarship has come to a broad consensus that the situation in first-century Corinth was something very much like this:

There were many temples to many different (small-g) gods, and those temples had priests and sacrifices just like the people of God were familiar with.

And when there was an animal sacrifice, the meat was given to the priests, and the priests could supplement their income “by selling, in the open market, what they did not need for their own use.”ⁱ

Some of the church members in Corinth were either going into those temples of other gods and joining in the sacrificial feasts, or they were buying the sacrificed meat from the priests at the market.

Meat was not an everyday availability for most people, so if it was available somewhere, that was a pretty big deal.

Also part of the landscape in Corinth was a very young and already conflictive Christian church, where two factions had formed.

Paul referred to those two factions as the Strong and the Weak.

Without going into too much detail, there was one group who were generally better off economically, and who saw themselves as having more knowledge than the others, more wisdom, and more pronounced spiritual gifts. They also saw themselves, and were seen, as having purer roots in the church. Whereas other people who had seen the light and become converts may have previously worshipped idols in the city’s teeming marketplace of religions, the Strong had either not been part of that scene, or had converted so forcefully that there was simply no question that they were of an exceptionally pure Christian faith.

All of which had convinced them and many others that they, the Strong, were the ones who were called to be the leadership of that church.

The others in the church in Corinth were faced with a quandary: they knew it wasn’t right that they were being dominated and in some ways subjugated by the Strong; at the same time, they didn’t

exude the theological confidence to be able to articulate exactly what was wrong here.

Sometimes it was manifested in their being pushed aside by the Strong. They would find themselves relegated to the back of the line for communion, and the communion elements would run out before they got to them. And the Strong, gathered in a literal inner circle, would kind of go, “Oh, well.”

Other times, the Weak—not equipped with the theological sophistication of the Strong—would find themselves looking at the behavior of the Strong and thinking: What in the world are you doing? Is that really what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

And in seeing that behavior, some of them—consciously or subconsciously buying into the myth of the Strong’s superiority—might think, “Well, if those people are doing it, maybe it’s OK.”

So here was an example. The Weak in the Corinthian church were seeing that the Strong were buying and eating the meat that had been ritually sacrificed to false gods. It seemed to them that that meant that the Strong were actively endorsing—even, in a way, worshiping those other, small-g gods. And the Weak were saying, “I thought you weren’t supposed to do that.”

Apparently this controversy made it into an earlier correspondence between the church and Paul, in which the Strong stated their case to Paul by making certain points, including these lines:

“All of us possess knowledge.” In other words, God gave us all minds: gave us leadership people minds; gave the Weak in our church minds. We’re supposed to use our minds to gain knowledge, and we have done so. And part of that knowledge is the mature, Christian confidence that “no idol in the world really exists; there is no God but one.”

So since we know God is the only real god, what in the wide world difference could it possibly make if we eat meat that was sacrificed to some non-existent deity, the kind that some of these Weaker ones in our church used to worship? Our partaking of that meat doesn't make that god any stronger or more powerful, because that so-called deity doesn't even exist."

Besides, and for the same reason, "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off in our relationship with God if we don't eat, and no better off if we do. It's about what we believe, not what we eat. you eat peanut butter, I eat tuna; you're a vegan; I'll have the mixed grill. Does God really care about that? We, the Strong, think not.

And so, in response to the fractious queries of the Weak and the defensive arguments from the Strong, Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

I Corinthians 8:1-13

¹Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge."

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

²Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³but anyone who loves God is known by him.

⁴Hence, 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."

⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—⁶yet 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.

⁷It 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.

⁸“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

¹⁰For 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?

¹¹So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.

¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

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The Sermon

“Sometimes,” wrote Bryant Myers in a book called *Walking with the Poor*, “we don’t think hard enough about this business of being witnesses. Sometimes we think there are two choices: being

witnesses or not being witnesses. This is not true. We are always witnesses to something. The only question is to what or to whom?

Bryant Myers is a scholar of transformational development, an approach to working with impoverished populations from a Christian perspective that recognizes the inherent dignity of people and integrity of communities, rather than going in with a toxic attitude of, “Let *us* figure out why you are suffering, which of course will be about *you* and not us, and then *we’ll* come up with a plan, and you can thank us later.”

One thing Myers explores, though, is how even Christians working in transformational development still often inadvertently end up sending the message that it’s not exactly God who delivers, not exactly Jesus who saves.

“Augustine Musopole,” he says, “the Malawian theologian, reports that the more successful the development intervention, the greater the reinforcement of traditional religion. ‘The more education, the better the job, the larger the house, the more you have to protect and the greater the temptation of witchcraft’ (Musopole 1997).”

Myers writes, “In a well-drilling project on the edge of the Sahara, a community watched a soil scientist and a hydrologist converse in highly technical language as they did soil chemistry and studied a hydrological survey. When asked what these two men were doing, the community replied that they were witch doctors. One was consulting the spirit of the earth and asking it where the spirit of the water lived. The other was reading magic texts in the search of power... Asked if these witch doctors were any good, the villagers replied that they were very good, better than their own witch doctors. “After all, [they said,] they always find the water.”

“When confronted with this interpretation of their actions, the men decided to go back the next day and explain the science behind

their work in simple terms the village could understand. *Explaining the miracle of finding water in the desert as “just science,” however, is a witness, only this time to the efficiency of modern science and technology.* Development technology continually creates this problem in traditional cultures (Bradshaw 1993; Myers 1993). Whether water is found in the desert or children do not die that normally would die, an explanation is demanded. With no explanation, the traditional worldview provides its [own traditional cultural] explanation.

“Or, if the modern development professional reduces the good news to “just science,” the explanation is a secular one. Either way, a witness is made that is not Christian and an invitation to idolatry has been extended.”ⁱⁱ

Expressed from a slightly different perspective, you might say that the witness we give, whether we mean to or not, is not always to the magisterial goodness of the awesome love of God; the creative, commanding, sending force of the call to discipleship of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we are more inclined, and better equipped, to witness to the power of our own knowledge. We make an idol out of what we know.

I daresay that many of us, myself prominently included, are a people who “know what we like and like what we know;” are comfortable with what we think we know; and are not strangers to beating one another over the head with what we know, and that we expect them to learn so that they can think and act and be more like us.

They say that whatever is most important to you is your God.

Our charge from God is not to know, but to love.

So Paul looked at what was happening in the church he had worked so hard to bring together in Corinth.

And rather than undermining the strength of the people he called the Strong, he kind of said, all right, let's just assume you are Stronger: you have knowledge; you have spiritual gifts; you have wisdom that these other church members don't have.

You've got all the knowledge in the world, and OK, fine, *you* know that that meat sacrificed to other gods is just meat.

But are you telling me that you can't see your way clear to caring what your personal extravagance to yourself is doing to your poor neighbor, who by your own assessment is not as worldly wise as you are?

Do you mean that if *your* decisions, *your* actions, *your* example, are hurtful and misleading to the people around you, you regard that as their problem, and not yours, and that's the end of the discussion?

You can't love somebody enough to care what effect your actions have on them?

Paul says, the issue isn't the meat. And it isn't what *you* know and what *you* think.

It's what it does to your sister or brother in Christ, and the effect it has on faith, when, even if you've figured out how you can get away with it theologically, your actions are leading yourself and others away from God.

And I don't think the Corinthians were the last Christians who've occasionally had a hard time mistaking their satisfaction with what

they know for their Christ-given call to love one another just as he has loved us.

So it is, at the very least, interesting that, at least according to Mark's gospel, Jesus' first act of healing took place not out among the derelicts and the hopeless and the faithless and the weak, but in the middle of a gathering for worship, the gathering of the people of God.

They were in the synagogue in Capernaum, and he was teaching. And a man with an unclean spirit shouted out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (that was the first voice to say that about Jesus).

And Jesus said, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing the man and crying with a loud voice, left him.

These things get into us and cause us to be less than who we were created to be.

Later would come the feeding of the five thousand, the healings, and the giving of sight. But Jesus' first act of healing was to restore someone's physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional integrity,

and it was in the house of worship, where someone with an unclean spirit found healing, and restoration, and new life, and hope.

They also say that you may be the first or the only Bible someone ever reads.

Whether we're any good at it or not, you and I are the primary Christian educators for all those who are looking up to us.

What is one thing you know you should be doing, but you choose not to?

Or what's something that you do, that you know, morally, spiritually, may have a harmful effect on someone else, somewhere down the line, but you do it anyway?

And do you have a pretty good rationalization worked up about why it's really not that bad, or how it is that it's OK for you to carry on without seeking some meaningful change in yourself, because there's some reason why God lets you get away with it?

Do you find ways to make yourself secure in that knowledge, even when it stands uncomfortably alongside the knowledge that it is not love, and it is not God's will, when we lay waste to the earth, or to our relationships, or to others' life chances, or even to ourselves?

Paul's message for all the church members in Corinth:

the weak, and the strong;

the long-time members, and the visitors;

the native Corinthians, and the new families in town,

was not a new and innovative message. It was simply a reminder:

knowledge, even knowledge of good and important and faithful things, is ultimately about you. If you are building up your knowledge like a private collection to show off to the people around you, that's really only for you.

Only when it is put to the service of love does knowledge become worth anything at all.

A story has been making the rounds this month about a woman in Texas named Romy McCloskey, whose profession is costume

designer, and whose hobby is raising and releasing monarch butterflies.

One of her cocoons was damaged, and when the butterfly eventually came out, it had a wrecked wing and would never be able to fly.

Ms. McCloskey found a video that showed how you can repair a butterfly wing, but it involves unusual intricacy, and takes phenomenal precision to do it.

Intricacy and precision that you would only have if you had the knowledge of, say, a professional costume designer.

She knew that butterflies don't have nerve endings in their wings, so it wouldn't hurt.

She cut the mangled part of the wing away, and glued in place a replacement wing from a butterfly that had died a few days earlier. She waited for the glue to dry, put some talcum powder on the wings to keep them from sticking in case there was any excess glue, and put the butterfly in a cage with some food to heal overnight.

She told a reporter, "I woke up the next morning and said, 'Please be alive.'"

It moved, and she said, "All right, buddy, let's go."

She took it outside and, she said, "He climbed on my finger, checked out the surroundings and then took off. He landed on some bushes, [and] when I went to reach for him, he flew up in the direction of the sun... He was on his mission."ⁱⁱⁱ

I have to believe that we can express our faith more truthfully in making that happen for our neighbors than we ever could in puffing ourselves up by showing off our knowledge as an argument for trying to keep them in their place.

I notice, though, that without that woman's knowledge, none of that could have taken place.

Our knowledge matters. But it will not save us.

The wisdom each of us has gained through our personal experience matters. But it will not save us.

Our skills, and the talents and expertise we have worked hard to amass, matter. But they will not save us.

Our awareness of the pain, suffering, deprivation and injustice that other people are going through matters crucially. But just our knowing about it will not save us, or them.

Our theology matters. Our knowing the scriptures matters. But it will not save us.

Only God can save.

According to I John, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (I John 4:8).

"So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (I John 4:16).

Love is like that butterfly whose broken wing was gingerly, carefully repaired.

You use your knowledge as well as you can to put love's delicate wings back together.

And when you let it go, you set it free, and you let it fly wherever it will.

Because you have to. You no longer have any control over it. It just flies off on its own mission.

Sometimes we think there are two choices: being witnesses or not being witnesses. But we are always witnesses to something. The only question is: to what or to whom?

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ⁱ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, 1 Corinthians (New Testament Message 10. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 76.

ⁱⁱ Bryant L. Myers. Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development (Revised and Expanded Edition) (Kindle Locations 6195-6211). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Allison Klein, "This costume designer repaired a butterfly's wing, then watched in delight as it flew away" (January 18, 2018) https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/01/18/this-costume-designer-repaired-a-baby-butterflys-wing-then-watched-in-delight-as-it-flew-away/?utm_term=.9de971953c6c