

1 Corinthians 8:1-13  
February 1, 2009

South Plains  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

Whaddaya Know?

I have been a Presbyterian all my life and I will go to my grave as a Presbyterian. But, I must confess to you that for the past few years I have had a love affair with The Book of Common Prayer. The tradition and dignity of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer has taught me a lot, although learning the moves of an Episcopal Church service is daunting.

I heard of one young man who married into that denomination. He must have come from a low Presbyterian background because he struggled to learn when to stand up, when to sit down, and when to kneel, not to mention the difficulty of finding his place in the Prayer Book. On one of the high and holy days in worship, he was working so hard and nervously to follow the order of service that he began to perspire. So during a long prayer, he mopped his brow with his handkerchief and left it in his lap in case it was needed again. When the prayer was over, his wife glanced at her husband's lap as she sat next to him and whispered as discreetly as she could, "Is your fly open?" The poor man replied, "No. But should it be?"

Some Sundays from my vantage point in the pulpit, I wonder if newcomers to Presbyterian worship have similar trouble following our service and knowing

why we do things as we do. Like our Episcopalian cousins, we Presbyterians can be guilty of assuming that everybody knows, or ought to know, how and why worship works. Our comfort with what we know not only makes others uncomfortable, but can actually turn them away from worshipping God.

That's the situation in the church in Corinth. First Corinthians is written by Paul to answer some questions the believers in that city have raised. More precisely, Paul writes to settle some controversies. One of these controversies had to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols. Here's the background:

Every large ancient city in the Roman Empire had temples, each one devoted to one of the various gods worshiped by Greeks and Romans. These temples were not only public monuments. A temple might have an altar for a burnt sacrifice and a dining area for eating the meat that had been sacrificed. Wealthy Corinthians would invite their friends and business acquaintances to a big dinner party in the temple where they served the meat. Very likely, the sacrifice of the animal in worship was not the main event, but it did present Christians in the Corinthian church with two problems.

First problem: If my business acquaintance or good friend invites me to this dinner party in a temple, why can't I arrive a little late after the sacrifice and just enjoy the meal? After all, I know as a Christian that pagan gods don't really exist. What's more, I know many

of my sophisticated friends are going to the temple because it's a social event, not because they are ardent believers in Zeus or Athena or some other god. That's the first problem, and any Christian who has been invited to a bar mitzvah or a Hindu wedding may have asked herself, "How much of the ceremony can I participate in as a Christian?" After all, if you know Christ, nothing else should matter.

There's a second problem for Corinth: What do I say to my brothers and sisters in Christ who see me going to this pagan temple and eating meat sacrificed before an idol? Don't they know that an idol is nothing but a fancy carving of stone or metal, not a real god? Tell them the truth, Paul. After all, you are the great apostle of freedom who says that the rituals of circumcision are not binding on us Gentiles.

Paul's answer is, "Yes, but." Yes, the idols of Rome are false gods. The meat sacrificed to those idols is no different from any other meat. But, some of your brothers and sisters in the church may not be as secure in their knowledge as you are. Some of them have just given up making pagan sacrifices themselves. If they see you going to one of these feasts that is advertised in honor of Zeus, they might fall back into paganism. The point of freedom is not to do what you want, but to use that freedom to build up each other. Don't let your liberty be a stumbling block to the salvation of someone else. You may be right to call their faith weak. But, if you wound their conscience, and here we quote Paul, "you

sin against Christ." Then, he makes a startling offer. "If food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." It's not waddaya know, but who do you know and what do they know.

Zeus and his tribe of gods have lost traction in the modern world, but the question of how to use our Christian freedom is very much alive. I want to ignore for today our interaction with other religions in order to think with you about our interaction with other Christians with whom we disagree. In particular, I want to address the wounds we suffer in our conscience over different styles of worship.

It's may be hard to imagine someone falling away from Christ because of a disagreement over how we worship, but it's not unusual for someone to stop coming to worship over a change in the service. In fact, two of my friends were cleaning up after communion when they got into a shouting match over a disagreement about how the elements should be served. Books have been written about the "worship wars" over hymns versus songs, videos versus words, chairs versus pews, jeans versus suits, and on and on.

We all know those choices are piddling compared to God's choosing us and our choice to follow Jesus Christ. But, what we know and how we use that knowledge is precisely the point of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. Some of the Corinthian Christians

knew very well that the meat served at a temple feast had no special importance. It would be like our eating a kosher hot dog. It's not a profession of faith in another religion; it's just a hot dog.

However, the real importance of eating that meat is the effect it has on brothers and sisters in Christ. The real importance of the way we worship is what it does for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and what it does for the relationship we have with God together. Worship nurtures faith, confronts our sins, encourages fellowship, challenges us to service and invites the world to follow Jesus. Decisions we make about worship will either animate faith and make it more alive or deaden faith, suffocating our spirits.

By this time, someone may be wondering why I am bringing this subject up. Let me assure you I am not suggesting we replace the organ with a band, although I know this congregation has loved the occasional addition of other musical instruments to worship. I want us to begin thinking about changes in worship because worship is changing in churches all around us.

This means two inevitable changes for South Plains: When Christians move into our area and visit South Plains, they will sometimes bring very different expectations about worship. If we take the attitude that we know better, we lose their fellowship. Cultural experiences are altering the way we see everything that happens in church, including worship. We should not

imitate other churches, but we need to keep ourselves open to the worship experiences that speak to other Christians, because fellowship with all Christians pleases God.

That brings up the second change for South Plains: when non-Christians or inactive Christians visit us, they find a gap between their culture and the culture of our worship. If we want to proclaim the gospel so the world hears the gospel and understands it, we have to bridge that gap. Another way to say the same thing is that we want to worship in the vernacular, in the language of the culture around us. We will not compromise our faith, but we will have to communicate our faith with language the world understands. One way to do that is through the way we worship.

I'm a word person. I like verbal language, written, spoken and sung. My style of learning is prioritized in that order with words on the page first, speech second and sung words in third place for me. Other people communicate better through the spoken word. Others communicate best through pictures and images and color. Others need movement, a kinetic communication style.

Presbyterian worship is heavy on words and rather abstract concepts like predestination, providence and perseverance. Even in worship we favor sitting and thinking. I cannot imagine giving up any of those, but I believe that we need to supplement our worship with

more concrete concepts, with a style more friendly to the emotional commitment of faith reflected in the culture of the twenty-first century.

The criteria for worship are not our preferences and tradition, but rather what scripture teaches and what speaks clearly to our brothers and sisters of the love of Christ. Those are the principles that have led us to make room in our worship to teach children about the parts of our service. It will take a little time. It will be repetitive for many. And, it may even seem to disrupt the flow of worship when we stop to explain what we're doing. I believe it will also encourage the little children to come to Jesus attentively and with enthusiasm.

If we can make alterations in worship that communicate the gospel message more clearly to anyone who comes through these doors,

If we can use music more effectively,

If we arrange the stuff of worship so it tells the love of God more winsomely,

Then we need to do it.

I've been brushing up on John Calvin this year since he will be 500 years old in July. Calvin wanted his church to celebrate the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, every Sunday. He couldn't get the church to agree with his argument that the sermon was the word heard and the sacraments were the word seen, touched and tasted. Instead of once a year, he settled on once a quarter. However many times we come to this table, whether we

come in the Presbyterian or Episcopal Church or some other place, we come because it is the Lord's Table.

And, we come not only because Christ is present in the words that are spoken, but because he is present in the cup and bread, seen, touched and tasted.