

Christopher Lougheed, January 28, 2018
Meat sacrificed to idols: the Corinthians and us (1st Corinthians 8)

(apology for what immediately follows if you're vegetarian)

-Today is a festival day in Corinth. You can see and hear cattle being driven through the streets. Crowds of people watch and follow the procession. Their destination comes into view. It's one of the big, beautiful, temples of Corinth. The city council paid a lot of money for those temples. I'll spare you the details, but the animals are slaughtered by the priests appointed by city council. The priests burn the fat and the bones on the altars to one or other of the official gods of the city, to ensure the continued status quo. Now what everyone was really waiting for: the banquet. The attendants hand out meat, first to the priests and city councilors, then to the rest of the crowd, and they eat. The leftovers will eventually wind up at the market

-For most of the Roman empire, the process by which you get meat looks something like this. Fish comes through private and non-religious channels. But not red meat. Outside of conservative state (or family) religion, no red meat. There is no secular supply chain, certainly not a reliably secular one. There never was. And very few people are bothered by this. Not the people gathered in front of the temple, anyway. Who's bothered by free food?

-almost all the Christians in Corinth used to eat the meat and used to be part of these festivals. But now they've radically changed their identity. As the Corinthian Christians see it, they've experienced Jesus. They've arrived. They used to be pagan. They used to believe in the municipal gods of Corinth. Now they're on a higher plane. They've reached the state of angels- they even speak angel languages.

But that's not what they're doing now- if you look closely at the crowd in front of the temple, **there they are**. And they're taking second helpings too. Somewhere, Paul is cringing.

This, or something like this, is the situation that this letter comes out of. How does this scene connect to our experience now?

-A few of us have direct experience of festivals a bit like the ones that I described. We might, then, be able to connect with Paul's instructions in chapter 10 that the Christians in Corinth should stay away from the temple festivals because, whatever

they may know, they look and, in the moment, probably feel like full participants in the sacrifices. We might also be able to connect with Paul's advice (against the advice of the church leadership in Jerusalem) that the Corinthian Christians can eat the leftover meat, bought in the market, as long as no one at the meal makes an issue out of it. This leaves the door open for hosting and being hosted by people of other faiths in Corinth.

But for most of us, this is quite foreign. As Christians in Montreal, there are several very good reasons why we might avoid meat, but the reasons in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 probably don't figure.

It's not too hard to see why: unlike the Christians of Paul's time, we live in a very secular society. A newly secular society- within living memory, religion was an all-embracing force in Quebec and some people were caught up in religion that wasn't their own - Catholic but also Protestant. Some of you know that the space where we're meeting now was built as the gym for a private (secular) Jewish school, the Peretz school in the late 1940s. The reason why there was a Jewish school here was as an alternative to the Protestant public schools like Baron Byng High School over on St. Urbain, which at that point had all-Protestant staff and started the day with the Lord's Prayer, even though the student body was almost 100% Jewish. And there was still a dual Catholic-Protestant public system in Quebec in the 1990s when I was in elementary school. This isn't so long ago, but it's not now, not here: in Quebec in 2018, it seems that the people who are forced to compromise their beliefs are people who want to be religious in visible ways and are forced to be more "secular" than they want to be (especially Muslims and Orthodox Jews). And very little of this is targeted at *us*.

So our situation isn't that of the Corinthian Christians (and as a group I think we're a bit more down-to-earth than they are). But we do still have something we can learn from them.

The church in Corinth is a community of people who have broken with their past. But there are different ways of breaking with your past, and Paul describes their way as the way of knowledge. Paul isn't against the break- he's all for it. But he thinks that they should break with their past in a *different* way. He describes *this* way as the way of love.

-To capture the distinction between knowledge and love here, I like the definition of love that I heard from the pastor at the church I attended in Edmonton, Holyrood Mennonite Church: love is having the other person's best interests at heart and

acting on it. That seems to fit what Paul is talking about here. The kind of “knowledge,” that he’s talking about, on the other hand, is basically snobbishness, even when it knows all the right things. And when we’re snobbish, in anything, other people always suffer. So knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (literally, “love builds a house”).

-Now, a radical break with the past, like the one that the Corinthians made, may or may not be a core part of our experience and our identity. Some of us may be in this room right now primarily because we’ve broken with our past. Others, probably more of us, are here primarily because we’re continuing or reconnecting with something in our past which had real value (which may or may not have been Mennonite). For a lot of us, it may be a mix between breaking and reconnecting. But I think that whether we’re breaking or reconnecting with something, we can do it either in a snobbish way or in a loving way - having the interests of others at heart and acting on that.

-Lots of people have dealt with, and do deal with, what to do with their past and how that affects other people. Paul sets these questions in a larger and more specifically Christian context in 1st Corinthians. What comes out is the largest body of teaching on the church in his letters, and 1st Corinthians been extremely important to Mennonites historically, probably second only to the Gospel of Matthew (which has the Sermon on the Mount). Paul sets the questions of relationship with your past in the context of what it means to be united with Christ. Being united with Christ involves identifying with Jesus, but it goes beyond what we would normally mean by that. It’s a life – the life of the individual, but also of the church – grafted onto the life and death of Jesus in some existential, ontological way that comes as a pure gift from God. You can’t prove that this is superior to other ways of being or seeing things, or force anyone into it. But it does affect things: it affects everything. Paul spends a large part of his letter on how being united with Christ impacts other ties that the Corinthian Christians might have. He talks about how it affects the most intimate human relations and how it affects the religious bonds that hold people together- bonds which seem to involve food. Which ties are possible for a Christian, and which ones are impossible? These are very real issues for his first readers: marriage and state religion were the two major pillars of the Corinthian social order and they raised all sorts of practical questions for the Christians in Corinth. Paul tackles them head on with pastoral advice.

-Back to us. We live in a different time and place than Paul and the early church in Corinth, so meat sacrificed to idols isn’t our issue, at least not for most of us. But how we relate to our past, to the society that we live in, and to each other as people

who try to follow Jesus - these are our issues. The specifics will be constantly changing here. But we need imagination as we look at these issues - Paul obviously had it. We need a clear sense of what it means to be attached to Jesus, with all that it involves. And we need the practical love that cares about how we affect other people and refuses to be snobbish. If this passage paralyzes us with fear of offending others, we're probably reading it wrong, but it does certainly call for discernment around how we affect people, and it does place some limits on our freedom. When we do offend people, particularly people in the church, and become aware of it, it's the time to do something about that, out of real concern for the other person.

Love builds up.