

Rappahannock Christian Church – 1/29/12
Dr. Kenneth Wilbur

Communion Meditation

Most, if not all, of us have returned to this Table time and time again. I'm sure we are well aware that these Elements, the Bread and the Cup, are symbolic of Christ – His broken body and blood.

Today there is another aspect of this Supper that I want us to consider. Sometimes I remember that in order for bread to be made, and in order for wine to take this form, both the grain and the grapes must be crushed. This reminds us that Jesus' body was also crushed for us. He took our sins upon Himself and was crushed by them. It is because He suffered in our place that we don't have to.

As we take this Bread and Cup, let us remember the suffering of Christ and His death for us. I believe this is what He intended for us to do when He gave this Meal to us. Let me take you to the 26th chapter of Matthew and read the words that He spoke that night.

Matthew 26:26-29 – While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom.”

“Should I, or Shouldn't I?”

1 Corinthians 8 – Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is

destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

Here we read a pretty detailed bit of admonition by the Apostle Paul in regards to what one may or may not eat.

Now, this controversy strikes close to home for me. My family, and parents, were very strict about certain things, many of which were not necessarily in the Bible, but they thought they were. To this day there is no beer, wine or alcoholic beverages in our home because that is the way I was brought up. Had I taken even one drink my folks would have, and still would, think that I'd just given it all up and gone to the devil.

This is the kind of thing the Apostle Paul is talking about. A lot of Christians, today, have impressive lists of dos and don'ts that they insist should be obeyed. They have ways of worship, of prayer, ways of doing church (should the Minister endorse one political candidate or other?). – These are issues and practices that are very dear to them. They may even think that their ways are God's ways, the only way something should be done, and to do otherwise is *sinful*, wrong, and foolish.

So this passage is not necessarily irrelevant just because the specific issue in question -- eating meat offered to idols -- is no longer the hot-button issue it was in the 1st century. We've got our own issues to deal with today. What is particularly important for us to hear within Paul's words of advice is his theological reasoning, the principles which inform him and guide him to the proper conclusion.

A lot of Paul's converts, you see, had been practicing Jews. As he went out on his missionary journeys he often went first to the Jews within a city, finding them in the synagogue. He preached to them, trying to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. He showed them proofs in the Old Testament, and he challenged them to put their faith, as he himself had done, in the atoning sacrifice of Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins.

However, many of these former Jews, once they had been converted to Christianity, had a hard time figuring out how they were supposed to live "in Christ." They were very comfortable in their Jewishness, perhaps even proud of their heritage. They assumed that the laws God handed down through Moses surely must still apply. These are not just laws like, "do not steal" and "do not commit murder" but also lists and lists of Laws about sacrifices and offerings, about how to worship, what to wear, what work could and could not be done on the Sabbath Day, what to eat and what not to eat.

Paul insisted that these questions and these issues lay at the very heart of the Gospel, and he felt very strongly about them. Jesus, he said, had fulfilled the Law of Moses *for them*. They were no longer required to keep all those laws. In fact, Paul told them that the *only way* they were ever going to be free from *having* to obey every, single, little rule day after

day was through faith in Christ. The only way they could ever really experience release from the burdens of sin and guilt was to leave the Law and its practices behind! They had to truly believe that Christ had fulfilled the Law *for them*, and that they were now free, and no longer bound to it. If they would trust in Christ, then they would experience new life.

Now, you have to understand that what we're talking about here was very hard for some of these converted Jews to believe. Their faith wasn't strong enough. They were frightened by the very thought! They had been told all of their lives that if they failed to observe the Law of Moses God would condemn them to hell. So...eat that meat that has been offered to a pagan idol? God forbid I should do such a thing! If I eat that food, I'll be sinning! I'll be condemned! I'll lose my place in God's kingdom! And I understand this. To this day my family feels the same way about some things, too.

But there were other Christians who saw and understood what Paul was trying to say. They knew that an idol is nothing at all. It isn't real! It's just a piece of stone or wood. The true God is the only God. He's the only real God there is! "So if I want to buy meat at a cheap price in that temple market...who cares? God certainly won't care! He's set me free from all of that foolishness!"

"In fact," [*and here is where Paul has an issue with those who are supposedly strong in faith*], "When the church meets for worship next Sunday, and we share a meal together, I'm going to eat that meat that I bought at the pagan temple. I know the weak Christians will be horrified. But they need to get over it! They should change their ways and change their thinking. Try to become more like me. What, am I supposed to refrain from eating just because *they* are weak and conscience-stricken? No way! Why should I let these weak people drag me down to their level?!"

What do you think? Is this the attitude that one Christian ought to have toward another Christian?

No! Paul says this is very un-Christlike!

If you know that your brother or sister in Christ will be offended by what you are doing then maybe out of respect for them -- and maybe with a loving heart, too! -- you ought to refrain, especially in their presence. Go ahead and eat that meat on your own, when they are not present and can't be offended, but show a little compassion, understanding and patience when they're around!

Now, what are some of the issues that Christians might disagree about today?

In my own family it was drinking alcohol. Most of you know that. (Actually, I have gone pretty liberal! I do have some cooking wine in my kitchen cabinet. My parents and grandparents would not have dreamed of consuming alcohol, even in their cooking!)

Maybe there are other issues for you.

- At the church growth workshops that some of us attended last Saturday there was some discussion about the church's ministry among gay and lesbian people. → *How do you feel about that?*
- Some people think that gambling is wrong, and therefore you should never invest money in the stock market. → *How do you feel about that?*
- Some ministers I know will not allow the singing of patriotic songs in church because they want to keep the church and the state completely separated. → *How do you feel about that?*

Have I touched any nerves yet?

The point is that, however strongly you feel about these or other issues, other believers in Christ -- I guarantee -- believe differently! You say one thing, and they insist that exactly the opposite is what "true believers" ought to do.

So, what are you going to do?

Well, I'll tell you what most people do. When a strong disagreement arises they leave and start another church. Or they kick out those people who disagree with them and *they* can go start another church.

I admit that, in our modern day and in this country, it is often not a terrible hardship, and sometimes it is even actually the best thing, when Christians agree to go separate ways.

But in ancient Corinth, this was not an option. The Early Christians were a tiny minority and there was only one assembly of Christians for hundreds of miles around -- let alone the fact that there is only *ONE* Body of Christ!

So maybe today we can afford the luxury of having a church on every block, each with its own rules and practices. Okay! Fine! But I believe it is wrong to cut each other off. We need to maintain our love and contact. We cannot use these types of disagreements to make hard feelings and disunity with these other folks. Christian charity demands this.

This is the reason I always make a point to attend the Martin Luther King celebration at Angel Visit Baptist Church down the road. I want them to know that they have our Christian love and support. It's the reason I'm so pleased to strongly support and be involved in Operation Inasmuch. What a terrific opportunity it is for Christians from so many different churches to come together for one day to offer service and witness side by side!

I believe that we have to find the common ground and manifest this to the watching world. We need to depend on grace for the humility that will allow us to do this, -- the humility that is found in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Benediction

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. – Psalm 19:14