

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany]

January 31, 2021

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Don't Make the Least Stumble!

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

(1)

The background of today's passage is the city of Corinth. It was a cosmopolitan city under the Roman Empire. Corinth was small, but as you see in the map, it was located between two bodies of water; so people from all over the Mediterranean world gathered in Corinth. Thus, the city was always full of diversity—diversity of goods, diversity of people, and diversity of religions. Corinth was a religious mix of Greek, Roman, and Oriental, and there was very little understanding of the new religion—Christianity—in the city. Corinth was home of the temple of Aphrodite and Artemis, representing the goddess of sensual love and pleasure. Accordingly, it is understandable why there were about a thousand temples where prostitutes served. With richness and diversity, the city of Corinth was an immoral city. Within this atmosphere and context, the Corinthian church was born; and thus, it was natural that some issues occurred in the church.

In the Letter to First Corinthians, it seems there were 10 issues: [1] division (1:10-4:21) by ethnicity (Jews vs. Gentiles) and social class (powerful vs. weak, noble vs. despised), [2] tolerance of incest (5:1-5:13), [3] lawsuit against one another (6:1-6:11), [4] sexual immorality (6:12-6:20), [5] misguidance about marriage and singleness (7:1-7:40), [6] eating food offered to idols (8:1-11:1), [7] wearing head coverings (11:2-11:16), [8] abusing the Lord's Supper (11:17-11:34), [9] spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40), and [10] denial of believers' bodily resurrection. You don't have to remember all 10 issues within the Corinthian church. We will cover them if we have a chance. But today, we will focus on the 6th issue—eating food which was offered to idols. It is known that most food in the markets or in public was first offered to idols and sold to people next, so that Christians in Corinth were not sure whether they could eat or should prohibit it.

Before we examine today's passage, what do you think? Do you agree that it is okay to eat food that is offered to idols? Or not? Living in the States, what is the matter with the issue—eating food offered to idols? It seems totally irrelevant to us and off topic in our lives. But we need to focus on the Apostle Paul's teaching and his true intention about eating or not.

(2)

According to the Lectionary schedule, we read 1 Corinthians 8:9-13. Regarding the issue, there were two opposite opinions within the church. One was to prohibit eating food sacrificed to idols because the worst behavior that God hates the most is the worship of other gods. Thus, eating food offered to idols is another behavior that is worshipping other gods. So, it should be prohibited among believers. On the other hand, Paul stands in this position, allowing the eating of such food because there is only One True God who created everything; and even though the food was offered to idols, they were false and nothing. And the food originally came from God. So, Paul said, "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" (v. 8). According to Paul, food itself—whether it was offered to idols or not—is irrelevant to our relationship with God. And whether we eat or not does not deepen our relationship with God or separate us from Him. Thus, he urged Corinthian Christians to decide whether to eat or not in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each individual.

However, his main emphasis is on today's passage. He warned the believers, saying:

"Be careful that [this liberty of yours] does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So, this weak brother or sister, for whom

Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.” [vv. 9-13]

What is his conclusion? They could eat or not according to their faith and belief. But if their decision and action according to their knowledge makes people around them who have weak faith or a weak conscience stumble and cause them to fall into sin, DON'T EAT THE FOOD OFFERED TO IDOLS. Here's what Jesus also said in Matthew 18:6: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." In other words, knowledge, faith, and action are important; but consideration and care for the weak could be more important.

(3)

Let me share what is going on in South Korea regarding the pandemic situation. And I believe it is relevant to the current situation of the States. South Korea is suffering from a third wave of the pandemic. There were less than 10 daily confirmed cases a few months ago, but now there are over 400, 500 confirmed cases every day and 10 to 20 people dying every day. Compared to the numbers in the States, you can think that they are little tiny numbers, but its population is about 50 million.

Just like the States, numerous people, especially small business owners, have accepted sacrifices and actively participated in the government's preventive measures for the wishes of the early end of the pandemic, even though they can barely keep their heads above water.

Unfortunately, however, churches were one of the causes of each pandemic wave. The government and the Korean CDC ordered no gatherings of 5 or more people in public; but some churches insisted that the order is religious suppression and a violation of fundamental human rights, so they did not follow the orders. Over 1,000 people gathered for worship, hundreds of their youth gathered for retreat, and mission societies recruited hundreds of youth and young adults for mission training. They might have prayed to God for the spread of the coronavirus to avoid them, or they might have believed themselves to be safe from the virus. But they were wrong. The bigger problem is they went out and delivered Jesus and the virus. Thanks to them, the pain of the vulnerable social groups is being extended and worsened. They decided based on their knowledge and faith to prioritize worship of God above everything else. But as a result, they brought fear and anger to the society. What would Jesus say? What would Paul say?

It is not what just happened in a small country on the opposite side of the world. It could happen in the States and in our faith community. Maybe, it has already happened within us. Some of us may have complaints against wearing masks and no singing out hymns during worship. Some of us may feel offended by so many don'ts in YOUR church. Some of us may think that our religious freedom is being taken away. You are right! We have our ancestors' spiritual DNA seeking religious freedom at all costs. We can think so based on our knowledge, belief, and faith. By the way, what if our knowledge, belief, faith, and action endanger the weak around us? What if our knowledge, belief, faith, and action cause the weak of faith to stumble and, consequently, make them leave God? Can we have a large millstone hung around our necks and be drowned in the depths of the sea?

We are called to be Christ's ambassadors. We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. For us, it is absolutely important to preserve what we believe at any risk and behave based on it. But sometimes, it could be more important to consider the weak within our faith community and society and take care of them so that they do not fall into frustration, despair, and disbelief because of us. Amen.