

Epiphany 4 Year B 2021
January 31, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever wondered to yourself, “If this is the answer, then what was the question?” This can happen sometimes, especially when reading the Bible. It sometimes feels like we’ve walked in in the middle of the conversation. Jesus is known to quite often ask questions without providing answers: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” “Who do you say that I am?” Who of you, by worrying, can add a single hour to your life?” But the Apostle Paul, on the other hand, tends to offer the reverse. We have answers, but no questions. So, we need to ask, “If this is the answer, then what is the question?” We only have Paul’s response to a particular circumstance; we do not have any of the original contexts which prompts his response.

It’s sort of like playing the game *Jeopardy!*. The answer is given, but the contestants must supply the question. And this is the pattern we encounter this morning in our reading from First Corinthians.

The question this morning seems to be whether one may eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. As Christians, we know that the idols are not truly God, and so the ceremony is meaningless. But the Corinthian community was divided and struggling. Christianity was new, and people were still trying to figure these things out in the midst of a community where the majority of people believed these sacrifices were important. So, Paul responds. Paul also addresses this topic in his letter to the Romans, so we can see that this was a concern throughout a great deal of the early Christian community.

This is a question about food, particularly meat. In a variety of ways, food was associated with pagan ritual, either in the course of a social or public event in the temple or home, and was often later for sale in the market. The Christian community was unsure whether this meat was still okay to eat. Some who were especially secure in their faith, or perhaps “puffed up” with knowledge as Paul puts it, readily ate the meat available, no matter its source. But others had difficulty separating their faith in Christ from the pagan sacrifices of their culture, and were concerned and confused about how to approach meat from sacrifices.

In response, Paul tells the Christians in Corinth that they’re focused on the wrong thing. The food—the meat—is not the question! And so, we find ourselves back to this issue of questions and answers. We have an answer in Paul’s writing, but what is the *real* question?

The truth is there’s no nice and neat question we can formulate, but what we find is that eating meat from sacrifices is just one example of a larger issue. The real concern had more to do with *freedom*, and *responsibility*, and *rights*. The real question wasn’t so much about eating meat, as it was about principles and people. At its heart, this was a question about love.

There is a significant difference between doing what we think is *good* and doing what we imagine we have a *right* to do. Just because we *can* do something, doesn’t mean that it’s a good thing to do. For example, I got into an argument with an older cousin of mine a few years ago. He and his sons own AK-47 assault rifles, which legally, they are allowed to do. Their justification for owning them is that they don’t have them to murder anyone, it’s just that they’re a lot of fun to shoot. But the same could be said about cars. Just because we can drive at 100MPH, doesn’t mean that we should. Accidents happen. Safety is of a concern in both of these cases. Plenty can go wrong, leading to death, whether intentional or not. The only difference is that one of these things is illegal and the other is not. Just because we have the freedom to do something, doesn’t automatically mean that it’s safe or good or responsible to do.

Similarly, some Christians in the Corinthian community were saying, “I can eat meat sacrificed to idols because I know that the idols aren’t real.” “I have a right to eat the meat if I want to, and it doesn’t do any harm.” From a legal standpoint, and even a standpoint of religious right and wrong, these people were correct in their thinking, and Paul agrees. “We know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ ... that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’ and ... We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do,” Paul writes. He argues against any kind of legalism that puts the rule first—living for the sake of the rule itself—and people and consequences second. He argues that living for the sake of the rule is the wrong perspective, and this is where the Corinthian Christians had gone astray. They instead needed to focus on the way these rules affect the people and world around us.

Rules can be important in establishing a community’s identity. We can look at dress codes for the Amish and Mennonite communities around us. These communities are faithful in living out the rules of their religious beliefs, and this includes the way they dress.

We tend to take a more flexible, relaxed approach to some biblical and religious rules. As Lutherans, we are reminded of Martin Luther’s well-known words, “Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.” We find ourselves focused more on freedom from the law, rather than a list of rules that we must follow. We don’t worry about the prohibitions in Leviticus against eating shellfish or wearing clothing made from two different materials. We don’t go break a neighbor’s window if ours is accidentally broken. And we don’t pluck out our eye when we see something offensive.

Since we are sometimes not very good with rules, we’re often confused about responsibility. What responsibilities do we have, if we don’t have to follow all the rules?

What we hear in the larger themes of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments is that we have a responsibility to our neighbor, a responsibility to our community, and a responsibility to the world around us. While we may be free, we must be aware of the consequences of our actions, and how others are affected by what we do. Or, as Luther puts it, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” We are simultaneously perfectly free and perfectly bound.

Paul and his opponents in Corinth are not arguing simply about meat and who should be allowed to eat what under which circumstances. Paul, in writing to the Corinthian Christians addresses this deeper issue of freedom. In fact, Paul’s writings had an enormous influence on Martin Luther’s theology. Paul reminds us that Christian freedom isn’t so much about *rights* as it is about *responsibilities*. And Christian freedom isn’t so much about *principles* as it is about *people*.

Paul tells us that food will not commend us to God. It will not get us into heaven. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” In love, Paul counsels the Corinthians to take care so that their actions and understanding of freedom do not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Even though salvation comes from God alone, and we know that our actions cannot save or condemn us, our actions *do* matter. Our God is more interested in how we use our actions and freedom to care for our sisters and brothers, rather than in our ability to follow a list of rules. The message of Paul to the Corinthians underscores Jesus’ message of love: our relationships are more important than our rules. Freedom is not a matter of rights, but of our neighbor’s need.

When Jesus casts out an unclean spirit in today’s Gospel lesson, he casts out that which separates a person from God, that which is focused only on knowledge and principle and rights. Jesus has the power to cast these things out of us too, and this is exactly what Christ does for us in baptism.

In baptism, we are freed from the law, freed from having to follow a list of rules in order to try to earn our salvation. The gift of salvation is given to us freely as the water is poured over our head and washes away our sin. But in baptism, we are also set apart to live in a certain way. We are set apart by God to do holy work.

And God promises to walk with us every step of the way. God will cast out our demons and redirect us when we become too focused on rules and principles, forgetting to love our neighbor. But we *are* called to act, and we are called to act in ways that are grounded in love. And this is the focus of today's readings.

Rules are easy. We have the ability to know exactly what they are and we can act accordingly. We can dress a certain way, eat a certain way, speak a certain way, and so on. But freedom, especially the freedom that Christ brings, is much harder. We have been set free to love and serve our neighbor, with the confidence that God is there to strengthen and guide us.

This is Paul's answer. Even if we don't know the exact question that was asked, Paul has a very clear message to the Corinthian community: *People matter. Responsibilities matter.*

Our call is to live into our baptism, and live into God's desire for our lives. We are called to serve those in need, care for our neighbors, advocate for the least in our society, and work for transformation so that oppression and violence are no more. This is our Christian responsibility, and God has set us free and filled us with love so that we can share it with the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.