

Reflection on the Word: January 28, 2017

1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Our world is a world in which boundaries are more and more important to us. Whether they are national, cultural, racial, or religious, it seems that in our world of increasingly challenging diversity, boundaries make us feel safe. Like Donald Trump's longed-for wall between the U.S. and Mexico. And in recent weeks, there's certainly been lots of news coverage about the importance of personal boundaries, as more and more allegations of sexual assault or harassment come to light.

All of us, from an early age are raised with some knowledge of boundaries ... there are certain taboos about things that "good people" just don't do. Think about some Christian taboos you grew up with. Maybe you grew up being told that Christians aren't supposed to dance, play cards, or go to movies. You might have been told that Christian men have to have short hair, and Christian women can't wear make-up. No doubt there were certain people and certain behaviours from which you were told to isolate yourselves ...

In today's scripture, the believers at Corinth were crossing certain boundaries concerning food sacrificed to idols that made some feel very uncomfortable In those days, much of the meat sold in markets was left over from pagan festivals. Some members of the community were concerned about eating such meat. They believed that to eat the food that had been used in the worship of idols was to lessen their devotion to God. But others considered such concern to be irrelevant. These conflicting attitudes were disrupting the community. And so they come to Paul with a question – Which one of us is right? Do we eat such meat or not?

Who is right? And don't we say the same thing in the church today? Do we wear jeans to worship or do we wear suit and tie? Do we stay with traditional organ music, or do we look at going more contemporary with guitars, and even drums? Do we reach out with support to refugees, or do we just look after our own?

Which is right?

What Paul writes back to the Corinthian church is interesting. He says: God has given each of you intellect. God has given you the gift of reason, and therefore you should use it.

But he also says, be careful. Don't run the danger of being caught up in being so focused on what you think is right, that you knock others aside in the process. Don't be so concerned with your own agenda, that you miss sight of the whole community.

Paul had strong feelings about the importance of building up the community, and he seems to be saying to the Corinthian church that there are lots of 'gray areas' in the Christian life. And we have to navigate those gray areas with love.

Though Paul seemed to agree that there was nothing wrong with eating the meat that had come from pagan sacrifices, he also understood that to do so would not take seriously the concerns of those who still worried that this would link them with idol worshippers. Consequently, the limitations imposed by love dictated that they not eat the food. Love for one another took precedence.

As Paul would say later in his letter to the Corinthian church, "Love does not insist on its own way." And so, while we acknowledge the importance of knowledge and intellect and the freedom to have our own opinions, we also acknowledge that ultimately what must determine our behavior is our love for one another. We are not free to think only of our own response to a situation. We have to take in account those affected by our actions. The health of the body of Christ--the church--takes priority over our own knowledge and freedom. These are the limitations imposed by love.

When it came to eating food associated with idols, in essence Paul says "I will limit my freedom voluntarily for the sake of people I care about." Because what's OK for one person might not be OK for somebody else. And what's OK in one situation might not be OK in another."

Over and over, we can find reference in scripture to the truth that without community, without knowing and loving each other, we have not really come to know and love God. Community means we have to come to know the people who are around us. We have to engage in conversation with one another, and to hear one another, even with all our differences and disagreements.

In our own day and time, what are the things that threaten to divide us as a church family? What are the things that might be acceptable to some, but an annoyance or a hindrance to faithful living for others?

It can be as simple as what kind of musical instrument is played in worship or what version of the Lord's Prayer is sung. It can be about determining how the investments are spent, or what groups are given permission to use the church facilities.

And then there are the bigger, moral issues:

Perhaps it is abortion – a question that some churches are talking about right now because the latest Canada Summer Jobs Grant application requires organizations to pledge their respect for abortion rights, among other human rights, before receiving federal funding to create summer jobs for youth.

There is the contemporary question of a good death – and a person's right to choose, when the prognosis is fatal, and there is unbearable pain and suffering, to have someone end their life. Some say it is absolutely wrong to deliberately end a life and others say, how do we balance this with a push for more effective and readily available palliative care?

And what about marriage – between persons of different faith or cultural backgrounds, or of the same sex? There are certainly some very strong and

polarizing opinions on that whole marriage question and it's one that the Worship Team will be inviting the congregation to be in conversation about in the near future.

It seems there is never any black and white answer when it comes to many issues. And in light of Paul's advice to the Corinthians, perhaps we need to be reminded that sometimes we are called to move beyond personal opinion and bias to thinking about the good of the community as a whole.

In light of today's gospel, perhaps we also need to ask ourselves, to whom do we look for authority in helping us to wrestle with our questions and determine our actions. Where does authority lie for us? - With Jesus? With some political party? With the culture as a whole?

The gospel tells us, "They were astonished at Jesus' teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority". What is this teaching that so astonished Jesus' hearers?

In the lesson we heard this morning, Mark didn't write it down for us to hear. For sure, Jesus' teaching is remembered in other places - Yet, it is rather odd that in Mark's gospel, where Jesus is called "Teacher" over and over again - by disciples, by the crowd, even by Pharisees and Herodians - very few of Jesus' teachings are remembered. In Mark, there is no Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew. Nor will you find many of Luke's parables.

It's been said, however, that in Mark's gospel, Jesus himself is the content of the teaching. The authority is not in particular speeches, but in the example of his life. Jesus lived as one who had authority, an authority radically different from that of tradition. Different from what had been expected.

We see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners; we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath day, silencing the scribes' objection not with an answer but with a question: "Is it not lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, to save a life?" We see Jesus moved by the feisty faith of a Syrophenician woman who dared to argue with him for the healing of her daughter, and we hear Jesus admit the limits of his own knowledge. It is this radically different kind of authority which compels us to re-examine what authority means for us, to look carefully at how authority functions, especially within the church. Jesus did not give us a systematic guidebook on authority. But, in Jesus' life, we see and hear clues of how his authority was made known in the world.

It was an authority that moves us toward inclusion rather than exclusion. Those invited into Jesus' circle included tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes, little children as models of the reign of God and foreigners as models of faith. Does that mean, therefore, that we should be suspicious of religious authority which moves toward *exclusion*, whose aim is to keep certain people out by written rule or daily practice? Perhaps so.

Jesus' authority was also one that valued persons over rules or traditions. And yet, in our longing for greater certainty and clearer religious authority, it is often persons who suffer. Whereas we long for absolutes, Jesus' authority was

marked by admitting there were some things he did not know, that only God knows.

Theologian and poet Gerhard Frost, in his poem "Loose-Leaf", tries to open us up to the possibility of this different kind of authority. He writes:

When your options are either to revise your beliefs or to reject a person, look again.

Any formula for living that is too cramped for the human situation cries for rethinking.

Hardcover catechisms are a contradiction to our loose-leaf lives.

We long for things to be clearer; we feel threatened when there seem to be two or more possible right answers. We would rather check "true" or "false". But Jesus stands with us in the midst of our loose-leaf lives, promising to be present with us as we struggle together for faithful answers in this time of human history.

If we can acknowledge that our human understanding is not the same as God's, we may come to believe that the Spirit which dwelt with Jesus will lead us into truth which has yet to be revealed.

If Jesus is the content of his teaching, then we must pay attention to his life which calls us to faithfulness to God, to responsibility for our brothers and sisters in Christ, *and* to a life of love.

Scripture reminds us that Love welcomes those with very different outlooks -- Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female, are all one in Christ. Love works to keep the various segments of the community from splintering into warring factions. Love is the only way those with different points of view can experience genuine community in Christ. Love means that each one of us has to know that we have to be open to making some compromise; that it is not always somebody else who needs to compromise for us.

That does not mean that we ought to avoid conflict at all costs, however. In fact, Paul insisted that the difficult issue around eating food used in worship of idols, was something that, in the life of the early church, needed to be confronted. The church was exactly the place for such difficult discussions. Paul simply urged that every member of the community be taken seriously, for knowledge does not belong to any one segment of the church. Good, intelligent, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ will interpret Scripture differently. People have different life experiences which shape their views and opinions. Therefore, we must listen to one another, really listen, not in order to correct one another but in order to learn from one another. And we must remember, as Paul warns the church in Corinth: knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. And perhaps it's more important to be loving than to be right. Amen.

