

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 28, 2024

Stumbling Blocks

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 4th Sunday after Epiphany

I'll be honest with you all. When I first read the texts for this week, I anticipated staying away from Paul. There's lots that we can talk about with Mark's reading and demon possession. And all the things. And well, as I admitted in Text Study on Monday, I tend to tune Paul out when he goes on these kinds of rants. Of the four readings on any given Sunday, I preach the least on the second reading – which usually is from Paul or someone claiming to BE Paul. And yet, by the end of our conversation on Monday, I was on an entirely different track. And here we are. On Paul and Stumbling Blocks.

But hey, we're in the year of Mark. We'll have plenty of time to talk about exorcisms and demonic possession. I'll leave that for another day.

A few notes of context before we are too far into this. Corinth, founded in 900 BCE, is unique and incredibly valuable in terms of trading and travel. The city is located on the narrow stretch of land connecting the Peloponnesian peninsula to the mainland of Greece. Because of this, Corinth had two ports, to the north, The Gulf of Corinth, which provided access to the Ionian Sea. And to the south, the Saronic Gulf, which connected to the Aegean Sea. Strategically significant because it is the only land route from the mainland to the Peloponnesian peninsula. And because of the access to the water. So significant was this connection that, as early as 600 BCE, they built a track between the two gulfs so boats could be moved over land instead of around the peninsula – a dangerous and unpredictable sea journey.

All of this to say: Corinth is a major hub of the ancient world. It is about as much of a metro area as you can get in the ancient world. Peoples from all around the Mediterranean found themselves in and around Corinth for any number of reasons. And people bring with them their culture and their religion. And everything that makes them, well, them.

It is a mixing pot with folks who follow the Greco-Roman Gods, with folks who follow the Egyptian Gods, folks who follow the Jewish God, etc. The major religions all practiced animal sacrifice. A metro area like Corinth would have vendors selling animals for sacrifice and vendors selling the meat from animals that had been sacrificed. And for those who ate meat, that was likely the system from which the meat came from – especially in the city.

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul has to address problems stemming from one of the practices of the community – the Sunday meal. It appears that the Corinthians would gather for a meal on Sunday in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Divisions over how this meal is to be celebrated and how the sacrament was to be observed. Later in the letter, for instance, we learn that people are bringing their own food to this meal, and everyone is eating their own stuff. The hungry leave still hungry. Those with access to food and drink go away stuffed and, to quote Paul, drunk.

Here, the question is different: Can we eat the food (in particular meat) offered to idols? Paul's conclusion: Sure. You can eat the food. After all, it is just meat. There is nothing to stop you. We know that there is only one God. Food sacrificed to idols don't hold any power. However, if our freedom to eat the meat causes another to stumble, then it isn't worth it. Luther draws on this paradox frequently. We are free in Christ, but our freedom should be lived out in service to others.

So I have to ask myself: what is a stumbling block today? Eating meat isn't likely a great comparison. We don't have an issue with eating food sacrificed to idols. One point was made on Monday that helped me think of this in a different way. Well, several. But one that I'm going to bring out today.

One person mentioned that for them stumbling blocks are the actions we take that make folks say, "Why would I be part of that?" And that has stuck with me. Do we use our assurance of God's love and God's grace in a way that builds one another up – in love? Or do we use our knowledge of what we think we know to puff ourselves up and to put others down?

Because, my beloved siblings in Christ, we ARE loved by God. We are redeemed by Jesus. And there's nothing we can do to change it. That

gives us tremendous freedom. There is so much that is permissible – we are forgiven. We are loved. We are united with Jesus in his death and his resurrection. And yet, there seems to be a disconnect with the love we experience from God and the way others experience us and our actions. When these two don't line up, well, we have a stumbling block ahead of us. And we become the stumbling block.

The Episcopal Church, USA, ran a study about two years ago, "Jesus in America." It found that 76% of Americans believe that Jesus of Nazareth really and truly existed as a flesh and blood human being. And 84% of Americans say that Jesus is an important spiritual figure. And yet, 55% of non-religious respondents see Christians (in general) as hypocritical, 54% as judgmental, and 50% as self-righteous. The least likely words associated with Christians (by non-religious respondents) are "giving" at 16%, "friendly" at 15%, and "compassionate" at 12%. I can't help but think of the quote credited to Mahatma Gandhi, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Alarmingly, even Christians aren't overly optimistic about Christians in general. The question was "what question do you associate with Christians in general? Select all that apply." This isn't pick your top three associations. It is a select all that apply. Only 57% of Christian respondents in this "select all that apply" question associated "giving" with Christians, 56% associated compassionate, and 55% associated loving. Those were the highest responses, BUT that means 43% of Christians do not use Giving to describe Christians in general, and 45% do not use loving to describe Christians in general.

Maybe we too know all too well the stumbling blocks that lay before us. Maybe it isn't so foreign to us to ask the question: "Why would I be part of that?" Maybe we too have experienced Christians acting less than Christianly.

Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said this in response to the study: "We are encouraged that the research shows Americans still find Jesus compelling, but we also see that the behavior of many of his followers is a problem, and it's not just certain Christians: it's all Christians... This is a wake-up call for us, and based on what we have learned, we are refocusing our efforts on being a church that looks and acts

like Jesus and models its behavior on his teachings. In this process, we hope to ignite a revival of love that encourages all Americans to do a better job of loving their neighbors.”

Today, is Reconciling in Christ Sunday. It is a Sunday in which we mark the building of a church that is intentionally inclusive of people of all gender identities and sexualities. So that inclusivity and the struggle for it is on my mind and heart. I was on Synod Council as the youth representative, just after the ELCA voted to allow LGBTQIA+ folks into rostered ministry. I cried with joy the day that happened – not because I had any clue that fifteen years later, I would be married to a woman – but because I saw myself as a fierce ally.

I remember a debate that came out in one of my first synod council meetings. Several of the pastors on Synod council were... quite upset with the recent decision (spoiler alert... they're no longer pastors in the ELCA but went to one of the groups that had splintered off from the ELCA). I distinctly remember one of them saying that this decision was a stumbling block that we've put in front of the faithful – and pointed to the looming loss of churches and of membership as proof of it. I heard them say incredibly hurtful things about people that I love. And for the first time, my love for Tanzania got wrapped up in this – because our decision “threatened” our relationship with our companion synod.

I don't remember exactly what I said. But I remember very nervously saying SOMETHING. And whatever I said, I didn't say it well. I was 17 – surrounded by people who thought they knew better than anyone else in the room. Today, what I wish I could have found a way to say as a 17 year old is that I believe that the stumbling block is not inclusion and acceptance, but rather the stumbling block for the church has been the resistance to inclusion and acceptance. The resistance to see the beauty in the diversity of a humanity that is God-made and God-beloved. That being so sure about God's judgment against people, we risk making it hard, if not impossible, for people to hear the Gospel, the good news for you and for me. And people like me are leaving the church because we don't find a place at the table.

At the end of the day, as Christians, Paul reminds us that we have a choice – in all of our actions. We can use the freedom that God gives us to

puff ourselves up. Or tear others down. Or we can use the freedom we have in Jesus to build one another up in love. Trusting that the love of God that extends to you, also extends to me. We're free to do either – God's love is promised in the waters of baptism and in the bread and the wine. Who do we want to be?

Amen.