

February 1, 2015

“Knowledge puffs up: but Love builds up”

Corinthians 8:1-13

I come from a country where there are many superstitions. There are lucky days and unlucky days on a calendar and the couples who plan their weddings try to avoid unlucky days. We are not to sleep with our heads in a North position; or we will have a short life, for north is the direction the head is placed at a funeral. Coming back from a funeral, people are to throw salt at the entrance to their house as a way of cleansing so that death may not come to their house. If you rest just after eating, you will become a cow. (I guess this is to keep us from being lazy.) The first dream of a new year will come true. If you see a spider in the morning, it means good luck, so you shouldn't kill it, but if you see one at night, it means bad luck so you can kill it. (I think I will kill it any way.) Never write a person's name in red ink. That would call for death on that person. This is due to names on graves being red.

Those superstitions don't have any scholarly, scientific or solid ground to believe in, but people have taken them in and somehow acted on them because they want to avoid anything unlucky, unfortunate or unwelcoming. Those who do not believe those superstitions, who have the knowledge that they are not true or worthy to follow, don't act on them. However, even those who have knowledge that these superstitions are groundless, do not write people's names in red because that would offend others. Something on a different level, but a bit similar, happens to the Christians in Japan, where Buddhism is a major religion. Those are the questions they face. Can Christians go to Buddhist funerals of their family members and friends? If they do, can they join others, who came to the funeral, putting some powdered incense over the burner, which is a gesture of praying that the dead might go to the blessed land? Can they sit and pray in front of the Buddhist altar? The actions of people putting powdered incense over the burner and praying at the altar would bring much comfort to the grieving families. Can we pray facing the Buddhist altar as far as we are praying to the Creator of us all?

Those are the questions I think have no clear right or wrong answer. If I cite Apostle Paul's words, “Each one should be fully convinced in his/her own mind (for his/her actions)...Why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on your brother/sister? So then, each of us will give an account of himself/herself to God.” (Romans 14:9-10,12) It is a gray area, isn't it? No immediate right or wrong answer. It depends on each situation, each person, and each conscience.

Something similar happened in the church in Corinth 2,000 years ago. It was about eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods. The Christians with knowledge knew that there was but one God. So eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods was not a problem. Jesus himself said, “Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.’” (Mt. 15:17-18) So, as Christians, we can eat anything, no food is unclean, right?

In the church in Corinth, however, there were Christians who had a “weak conscience,” according to the Apostle Paul. They saw those knowledgeable “strong” Christians eating the meat sacrificed to pagan gods at a gathering in a pagan temple and they were troubled and distressed. Maybe they followed the actions of those knowledgeable Christians and felt guilty for eating the meat. If anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean and it defiles God.

Whether or not to eat the meat sacrificed in a pagan temple is a grey area, isn't it? The Apostle Paul's approach is clear. If it troubles and stumbles those brothers and sisters with “weak conscience,” don't do it. Don't eat the meat sacrificed to pagan gods.

He is clearly aware that we can eat any food. No food is unclean. He is a knowledgeable Christian. “...Food does not bring us near to God,” says Paul, “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.... If food causes the downfall of my brother or sister, I won't eat meat ever again, or else I may cause my brother or sister to fall.” Paul willingly gave up his rights to eat meat for others. The basis for his actions in a Christian community is clear: respect and love for others. “All things are lawful for me,” says Paul, “but not all things are helpful.” (I Cor. 6:12)

What happened in France lately has brought shock and distress to the world community. A cartoonist, Charlie Hebdo, of a French newspaper was assassinated by the Islamist extremists for his provocative cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. My sympathy goes to the Hebdo family for the loss of their loved one by violence. My condolences also go to the Muslim community whose true faith was perverted by radical Islam as a murderous abomination.

Freedom of Speech is a precious gift we all want to cherish and keep. We would like to be reminded, however, that with any freedom comes our responsibility to use it for a good cause... to build up a safer, more respectful and peaceful world community. “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful.”

We live in a society where individualism and personal rights are valued. Today we are reminded by the Apostle Paul of the timeless seasoning that makes any community and our world a gentler and kinder place - that is, respect and love for others. The Apostle Paul chose a radical limitation of his freedom for others. He valued the demonstration of love over a demonstration of knowledge and the insistence on personal freedom. And he wrote, “Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up.”

One of the most valuable strengths of this congregation is love. Many people joined our church because they felt welcomed, cared for and loved in our congregation.

May that love continue to be the priceless seasoning of this congregation within our church and beyond. Amen.