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1/28/18--University Presbyterian Church
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

WHEN RIGHT IS WRONG

It can be so satisfying to be right. We've all had those disputes with others in which we are certain we are correct. Whether we are trying to settle a disagreement over which actor starred in a particular movie, or what mountain peak is the tallest in the continental United States, or whether the new tax plan will help or hurt the middle class, it can feel good to have the truth on our side. And in a great many cases, it has never been easier to prove our correctness. We can just whip out those devices we carry around with us at all times and do a Google search to prove that we possess the truth.

But I also wonder: is it possible that sometimes being right could also be wrong? The early Christians in the city of Corinth wanted to resolve a dispute among themselves and so they wrote to the Apostle Paul for him to declare who was right and who was wrong. On the surface, their dispute may seem trivial to us all these centuries later. The early Christians in Corinth were arguing over whether it was acceptable to eat meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols. Some of them argued that since idols were no threat to the one true God, what harm could there be in eating the meat used in the pagan rituals. Why waste perfectly good food? Others, however were not so sure. They worried that eating meat used in idol worship was to lessen their devotion to God. Which side was right?

Paul writes back and he agrees that there is nothing wrong with eating the meat. There is only one God and thus all idols are meaningless. So eating the meat sacrificed to idols would be meaningless as well. Unless . . . unless, Paul argues, eating this meat could cause another one of your community to stumble in their faith. Unless eating this meat did not take seriously the

concerns others had that such activity might link them to idol worshippers. There was nothing wrong with eating the meat sacrificed to idols except that it could cause harm to others in their community. And so Paul advised against eating the meat. It was a case of something right being wrong.

The problem confronting the Corinthian church, that of eating meat sacrificed to idols, is largely irrelevant to us here today. But the underlying issue is not foreign to us. The underlying issue is summed up by the Apostle Paul when he states, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Those who felt it was right to eat the meat approached the problem with a belief in their superior knowledge. Their knowledge of the faith gave them every reason to believe eating the meat was perfectly fine. Thus, they approached the issue with an air of spiritual superiority: "I can eat this meat because I know that eating it is spiritually meaningless, unlike these other people who are ignorant and don't understand that." But Paul argues that despite having all the right knowledge, these believers lacked an appreciation for love of their neighbor. For Paul you see, love was more important than knowledge. Love was more important than being right. Paul was less concerned with being right than he was with right relationships. And you can't have right relationships when the weak are dominated by the strong.

Domination lies at the core of this problem. Some of these Corinthians with the superior knowledge about meat eating did as they pleased regardless of the feelings it raised in others. They plowed their way to the carving station at the buffet table regardless of who this hurt. After all, as they saw it, they were in the right. But Paul takes a whole new approach to the situation. There are limitations that are imposed upon us by love. You can't do whatever you want when you take love seriously.

The love Paul talks about here is not the kind of sentimental warm love we typically think of when we think of "love." Paul is talking about a kind of love rooted in respect, in a commitment to the wellbeing of another. A bit later in this same letter, Paul will offer up that famous poem about this kind of love in 1 Corinthians 13, in which he states, "Love does not insist on its own way." In other words, love does not dominate.

The kind of love we see Jesus live and proclaim was not rooted in domination. He shared God's love in both his teachings and in his actions. But he did not dominate. Jesus proclaimed a way of living in the world we might even call the "right" way--the way of love, and grace, and compassion, and service, and humility. But even when he possessed knowledge of the right way, he did not dominate people by forcing them to follow this way. It was always a choice given to people.

Christians have not always followed this example. Christians have had an ugly history of domination in the name of the Lord. Believing they possessed superior knowledge about what beliefs were "right," Christians carried out crusades and inquisitions, and burned people at the stake, and kicked people out of congregations. Throughout history, Christians in the Western nations have carried this penchant for domination into the political realm--invading weaker countries, enslaving weaker peoples, claiming natural resources for themselves all the while maintaining they had the right, even the divine right, to do so.

Beyond the fact that domination hurts people, a domination that is rooted in a perspective of being right is two-fold. The first issue is that just because you think you are right does not mean you *are* right. Sometimes you are wrong. Certainty in being right lacks humility. Certainty makes us arrogant, or as the Apostle Paul puts it, "Knowledge puffs up." Without an appreciation for other perspectives, other opinions, we become proud. We fail to see that we

could learn from others. And we cut ourselves off from our own need for God's grace and we turn ourselves into little gods.

The second problem with a dominating correctness is that even if we are indeed correct, such a perspective lacks love. "Knowledge puffs up," writes Paul, "but love builds up." The love we see in the example of Jesus, and the love called for by Paul in his letter, is a love that is concerned with building up those who are weaker and more vulnerable. Paul calls the stronger Corinthians, those who possess the knowledge that eating the meat is meaningless, to give way to the weaker members of their community for whom meat eating remains a problem. Rather than dominate from a position of correctness, love imposes limitations on oneself, parameters of sensitivity and compassion toward the other.

These ingredients of sensitivity and compassion toward others seem sorely lacking in our society. The corporate and political worlds seem governed by the mentality of domination and a willingness to run right over your opponent on your way to achieving your goals. Not only do some of our leaders assert their absolute correctness in all matters, but they assert this position through ugly words that demean and degrade their political opponents.

That's why I was surprised by a recent interview I saw on television between Ohio Governor John Kasich, who is a Republican, and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, a Democrat. They were being interviewed together about a variety of national and international topics. Several times in the interview, Governor Kasich said something like, "What Secretary Albright just said was spot on," or "I totally agree with what Secretary Albright just said." Then in discussing the need for immigration reform, Gov. Kasich noted that he was all in favor of having strong borders but added, "we can't project an image that we don't love our friends and neighbors." He went on to note that he was a Christian and said, "What Christians are all about

is about love, caring, forgiveness, and compassion--that's America. And if we lose that we could lose our souls." And then he added, "Finally, how about Sec. Albright? She's iconic, she's contributed a great amount to this country and I'm privileged to always spend time with her. She's terrific!" There followed a stunned silence. Secretary Albright seemed stunned. The interviewer seemed stunned. We the television audience was stunned. When was the last time you heard such an exchange between a Republican and a Democrat? I suppose a cynic might say it was all calculated by him to win over voters for some future bid he may still make for the presidency. But you know what? Calculated or not, we could use more discourse like that: openness to others and their views, an appreciation for compassion, discourse grounded in respect and even admiration of others, and words that that build up rather than tear down. Knowledge puffs up, says the Apostle Paul. But love builds up.

None of this means that we are supposed to avoid conflicts, give in to other people when we don't believe in what they stand for, or that we should acquiesce whenever differences arise. What it does mean is that when faced with conflict and disagreements, we assess how we use our power in light of love. Do we use our power to build up or to tear down? Do we trample over others in our pursuit of what is right, or do we impose limits on ourselves out of love? Domination is about using our power to force something on others. Our power may reside in our socio-economic position. Or our power might come through status or position--the role we play within our community. Or our power might be found in our educational background or financial status. Or our power might be an emotional or spiritual strength we possess. How do we use our power in light of the call to love?

The Apostle Paul teaches us that what is more important than being right is that we *be* love.