

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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## **The Cost of Being Free**

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

This week we relearned a critical truth. We learned that even though many of us have never met our former governor, Rod Blagojevich, we have still been affected by him. I don't refer to his policies here. I refer to his indiscretions. Listening to him speak to the state Senate we all understood, more than we once might have, how one person's personal choices are not so personal—they affect us all. I am certain his actions have led many to hate and distrust politics. They have, perhaps, even led a few to head down their own rocky path of shady deals and greedy plans. Our governor, former governor now, had all the freedom he could imagine and yet he did not understand that that freedom came at a cost. He owed something to the people of this state.

In this part of 1 Corinthians Paul tells us that it is the same with the church. Except, in the church, the stakes are even higher than the stakes of the highest office in our state. Here's what Paul says: you have to be careful for your actions affect another person's faith. Your dealings and associations and even hobbies might lead another believer to hate Christianity, to distrust it. Your actions might even lead them to stray from God himself. Even more difficult, it's not only our indiscretions that might hurt other believers. As Christians we have tremendous freedom in Christ but even though God gives us great freedom we are not completely free for even behavior that does not offend God might still lead others astray.

Before we get into all that, we need to know a little bit about what we're reading and who we're reading about. This letter, First Corinthians, is a letter written by Paul to a young church in the city of Corinth. Corinth is part of what is now Greece. From his writing it is clear Paul has received a letter from this church. Much of their letter must have been a list of their grievances against one another and an entire clothesline of their dirty laundry. We know this because Paul keeps referring to the issues they've listed for him and it's not good. One faction of the church has been playing a bit of a game with the Lord's Supper. They've announced they will have communion, which would include a huge feast as well, and they they've started eating long before they told certain members to be there, leaving nothing but scraps for much of the church. Some of the married members of the church have, due to their new faith, chosen to abstain from sex while some of the members have, due to their new faith, decided it gives them leave to have sex with everyone they meet! They are a cantankerous bunch and they fight all the time. If you've ever been a part of a church that fights you know that it is not pretty. It is into all of this mess that Paul is writing this letter.

Another of their current battles is over pagan rituals and the meat that was burned on the altars there and then served. These rituals would be similar to being part of the country club. It's what all of the more elite citizens did, whether they were pagan or not. So some members of the church attend these gatherings and say, "It is alright for me to eat this meat for I have a deep knowledge of God and I know that pagan gods are nothing and that meat cannot hurt my faith." Other members of the congregation are offended and hurt by these actions saying that these idols still have power and the parties they attend and the meat they eat will lead them back into a pagan life. The ones claiming superior knowledge are the ones who have written to Paul, hoping he will back them up and, perhaps,

even lift them up since they are such models of mature faith that they can move in two worlds uncorrupted.

Paul takes their question and turns it on its head. He says this is not about knowledge at all. Do you have new freedom in Christ? Of course! Christ has saved us from the old laws of withholding from certain foods or certain people or certain places. Our faith tells us that nothing that goes into the body can corrupt it. These mature Christians have found this is true and that is wonderful but their new freedom comes at a price. Christ's gospel completely frees them but, at the same time, his gospel binds them as well. This isn't about knowledge or freedom at all, says Paul. It is about love. Love is the cost of this new freedom in Christ. Even if we are doing things we know won't hurt us in our faith we are bound in this new faith to love those around us. At times this will mean loving them enough to change our behaviors if our behaviors are hurting them.

Paul calls these believers who can be hurt "babies in the faith." Just like real babies they may just now be able to walk on their own and get around in this new world of belief. But, like babies, they cannot carry anything extra yet. Mature walkers can carry extra burdens and it will not hurt but it would not be acceptable to put that same burden on a new walker. In this way Paul reframes the issue. Knowledge just puffs you up, he says. But the love you offer will build you up. This is no longer about poo-pooing those who are more simple in their faith. It is a condemnation of those mature Christians who have forced their burden onto others.

Take this example: just as our congregation enjoys a longstanding tradition of youth trips with Group Workcamps, my home church has a long tradition of attending Montreat Youth Conferences. This is a Presbyterian college and conference center near Asheville, North Carolina, where a thousand youth a week will come together to worship, study, share and, occasionally, go rock hopping in the stream that runs through it. One of the main components of the week is time with a small group you are assigned to at the beginning of the conference. These groups are a bit of a misnomer because "small" usually means 30 people or so. My mother was attending one of these conferences as an adult chaperone and during her small group time the people around her started having a discussion about suicide. One boy near her spoke up. He spoke with fervor and certainty. He said, "Anyone who kills themselves goes to hell!" My mother was deeply troubled for she does not believe this. She believes that nothing WE do can separate us from God. You may agree with her and you may not but she has come to her decision through years of struggle with her own faith and beliefs. She came back to our group asking whether or not she should pull this boy aside and set him straight. In the end, she did not inform this boy that he might be wrong. From then until now she has always said, "I couldn't do it. I did not know this boy and I had no right to shatter his sure faith when I, after this one week, I would never even see him again." She felt she had greater knowledge and her knowledge gives her freedom but, in the end, she was not bound by that knowledge. She was bound by love.

This love thing is tricky. It can cost a lot. We have beliefs that are important to us, that have led us to a deeper faith but Paul says even those treasured beliefs must be let go if they could cause a baby to stumble. So while the governor and his actions might concern us, we should be far more concerned about our own behavior for we must be wary, not just of any indiscretions, but even of the extra baggage we might be unloading onto people who cannot carry it. As Paul puts it in the next chapter: while the gospel makes me completely free, it also binds me. Your neighbor in your pew: Christ died for that person! Your brother or sister in faith: Christ died for that person! Paul wonders, if that is so, can't you give up a little meat? Can't you set aside your greater knowledge for your love for them?

Though Paul was writing to a single congregation 2,000 years ago, he also speaks to us in this congregation today. He is asking us to show how much we love more often than we show how much we know. He is asking us to be bound by love, our only cost of being free. Amen.