

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH F. KEELER

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (B)



28 January 2018

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20
1 Corinthians 8: 1-13
Mark 1:21-28
Psalm 111

On a recent trip, my family was fortunate enough to spend some time at the British Museum in London. One of the many extraordinary treasures there is the Rosetta Stone which, of course, became the key to deciphering Egyptian Hieroglyphs. The story of that stone and its incredible value in unlocking an entire written language captivated all of us, especially our three teenagers. Communication, through various forms of writing, whether in stone like the Rosetta Stone or the Ten Commandments, or communication on paper, and now even electronically, communication is central to understanding the history of humankind and civilizations.

Letter writing is another way we come to know people and history. Perhaps you've had the unique experience of coming across precious letters saved by elder relatives and, by reading those letters, glimpsed a whole new dimension of their lives. Written correspondence is a primary source for biographies as well. Just a few years ago many of us were reading the popular biography of John Adams by David McCullough.

The reason that book, and biographies in general, touch us so deeply is because people's stories become more meaningful when they are revealed in their own words and voices. Reading John and Abigail Adam's personal letters brought them to life in a way McCullough's prose never could have.

The Bible is a book, it's actually many books, and within all of the books of the Bible are thousands of people's stories and letters. The Bible recounts a history as well. Our history, the history of God's continuing action among us, the history of God's relationship with us that is at once cosmic and intimate, both timeless and immediate. Of the twenty-seven books that comprise the New Testament section of the Bible, exactly one half have St. Paul's name attached to them. This bears repeating, half of the New Testament is connected with Paul in some way. In our time since Epiphany we have been reading selections from a specific letter Paul wrote, one of his letters to the Christian community in Corinth. Today I'd like to talk with you for a few minutes about Paul, and his letter to the Corinthians, and what all that might mean for our community today.

Frederick Buechner wrote that Paul: "Planted churches the way Johnny Appleseed planted trees. And whenever he had a few minutes to spare he wrote letters. In those letters, he

bullied, he coaxed, he comforted, he barred his soul, he reminisced, he complained, he theologized, he loved, he inspired.” Paul’s letters to his communities throughout the Mediterranean world reveal first and foremost that he was passionately invested in and concerned about the communities he was instrumental in founding. Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Collossae, Phillipae, and Rome – he traveled and wrote, and when these first century Christian communities wrote back for guidance, he wrote back to them again and again. Paul even wrote letters from his jail cell while waiting to be executed. And the finest of these letters make up one-half of our New Testament.

It’s difficult to enter into any letter mid-way through without being familiar with its context and story. Imagine reading a random paragraph from one of Abigail Adams letters. This can be the challenge of our lectionary readings – we just get a smidge of the story, a fraction of the letter.

But remember Paul’s writings are so densely packed with vital instruction and important meaning even our short Sunday passages deserve our full attention. The issue at hand in today’s letter is whether it’s permissible for Christians in Corinth to eat the meat that was left over from sacrifices made to pagan idols. Now most, if not all, of the meat available in the markets were from temple sacrifices. The Corinthian community was trying to decide if, as followers of Christ, it was ok to buy and eat this meat and they were divided on the issue.

The specifics of the debate are interesting, especially to those of us who love Biblical literature, but the real issue here is not about the meat itself, of course, and notice Paul does not take sides. What is at stake is the strength and wholeness of the community. Both Christian freedom (the decision to eat meat) and Christian restraint (the decision not to eat meat) are, and need to remain, grounded in love and concern for the whole community. Paul is crystal clear, first and foremost, that we are bound to one another and ultimately to Christ.

Eating any kind of meat is certainly not an issue Paul is even close to taking sides on because it’s not worth weakening an important Christian community over. Martin Luther will build on same this theme of balancing freedom, responsibility, and community fourteen hundred years later when he writes: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Yes, we are free, to worship Christ and receive the Grace that comes with that, but chiefly we are bound to one another and to Christ. A central theme in all of Paul’s letters is relationships within the Christian community lifted up as central to being in Christ and of the Body of Christ. In today’s passage from Corinthians Paul reminds us that Christians can’t have it both ways – if we claim that we are bound to God and saved by Christ, well then, by golly, we are bound to one another as well.

Paul comes down very hard on those who think they are above a Christian life that doesn't involve responsibility for one another. He himself will, if necessary, become a vegetarian for the rest of his life rather than harm those who would be hurt by his eating idol meat.

And so what might this mean for us? Well, brothers and sisters, we are a parish on the threshold of a new era. As such, we are called to protect and carry forward many of our old ways of being the Body of Christ in the world. And, at the same time, we are also called into new life in Christ, welcoming others and new ways of being the Body of Christ in the world. And throughout all of this transition, as we navigate our path ahead, perhaps with differences of opinions of what our future might entail, we are chiefly bound to respect and love one another. Paul's letter reminds us today that one of the most essential charges for our life together in Christ is simply this - we must remember to love one another. Amen.



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