

Sermon for Sunday, May 5, 2024

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is a saying among pastors: preaching from a lectionary forces you to preach on texts you might otherwise avoid. Today's text from 1 Corinthians is one of those texts in part because it talks about fornication (sexual impropriety) and because it requires a certain amount of background information in order fully grasp the point Paul is trying to make. In order to arrive at a point where we understand how this text might be relevant to us let's begin by examining more of the culture of Corinth.

Last week we learned about the cosmopolitan nature of Corinth as a crossroads for commerce. Geography is relatively easy to understand. Today we're going to explore the philosophy of Corinth. Now, entire classes are taught on Greek philosophy and I know very little. But before you shut down your ears, hear me out. It's not going to be as bad as you might think.

The Greeks prized education and the study of philosophy. Philosophy was used to make sense of the world using reason. For them philosophy dealt with a wide variety of subjects. People who were rich enough to have leisure time would study different philosophical schools of thought. Here's what I mean: just as Jesus had 12 disciples that he carefully taught, there were Greek philosophers who taught students. Just as Jesus' disciples went out and spread the gospel, these philosophy students would go out and teach different philosophies or ways of thinking about life; especially in the cities of Greece.

- I'm going to name three types of philosophy to help you understand better. One type was called Cynicism. Cynics tried to live according to nature and against convention; some would go so far as to live in extreme poverty.
- Another type was led by a teacher called Epicurus. His philosophy was based on "the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain."
- A third type was called Stoicism. Disciples of stoicism were taught to be indifferent to personal circumstances and accept things that they couldn't change.

These philosophies may not be specifically active in today's world, but you are likely familiar with the words cynic, epicurean, and stoicism that have come down to us through the ages and even today represent particular ideas and ways of living.

Going back to my original point: Greek ways of thinking permeated the society of Corinth. And these ways of thinking were hard to shrug off because they were so deeply embedded in people's lives. Paul came to Corinth to share the good news of Jesus; but this included teaching a new (Christian) way of living. In order to make a difference in the lives of people living in Corinth he needed to address specifics. Paul begins with sex.

In the Corinth of that time there were culturally acceptable sexual practices that we modern people would find abhorrent. Free men had many more rights than slaves, women, or children. When Paul speaks of fornication he is specifically addressing the fact that Greek men in Corinth thought that they had the right to have multiple sexual relationships with anyone. As one commentator wrote, "*The sexual latitude allowed to men by Greek public opinion was virtually unrestricted. Sexual relations of males with both boys and harlots were generally tolerated.*"

You have an insert in your worship folder that looks like this. There are two columns: one labelled "The Corinthians say" and the other labelled "Paul says." This insert may help you to understand the point that Paul is trying to make in verses 12-14 as he grapples with the sexual laxity that existed in Corinth.

It seems that the Corinthians had a slogan that went something like, "All things are lawful for me." This slogan wasn't just about staying within the boundaries of the law, this was about their claim that the person had the sovereign right to do *anything* they wanted. And to do so without regard for anyone around them that might be impacted by that action.

Paul counters this slogan with the claim, "Not all things are beneficial." Paul again repeats the slogan, "All things are lawful for me," and counters with "I will not be dominated by anything." Finally there is *apparently* another Corinthian slogan stating that "food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," indirectly implying that sexual urges are just part of human nature. Paul replies by saying that the body is created by the Lord and meant to serve him.

Paul argues that the body belongs to the Lord Jesus, and God has confirmed [God's] concern for the body by raising the Lord Jesus; this act of power declares God's ultimate promise to raise us also...The body is not simply a husk to be cast off in the next life; the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims that we are to be redeemed body, soul, and spirit...The resurrection of the body is an integral element of the Christian story. Those who live within that story, then should understand that what they do with their bodies in the present time is a matter of urgent concern. (pg 104)

The key idea for the argument that Paul is making in the Scripture reading for today is the affirmation that we belong to God and not to ourselves. (pg 106). Paul's climactic argument against fornication with prostitutes: our bodies, which belong to God, should be used in ways that bring glory to God, not disrepute....They say "I am free to do anything"; Paul says "Glorify God in your body." Their argument focuses on the rights and freedoms of the individual; Paul's focuses on the devotion and service owed to God. (pg 106-7)

Knowing this: how shall we take Paul's teaching to the church in Corinth and apply it to our personal lives? While Paul is clearly speaking specifically about sexual matters we might extend his teaching to other moral matters. We must think of ourselves as people who belong to the Lord and therefore our moral decisions should be shaped not by personal preference or expediency but by the desire to glorify God in our bodies. (an amplification of pg 109)

As Christian followers of Jesus we must never forget that salvation is God's idea, and not one that originated with humans. It is the great thought of God. If we have an experience of God it can be compared to a door through which salvation comes into the conscious level of our life. That's the Holy Spirit at work in and around us. Through our baptisms God's Spirit dwells within each of us and we are charged with doing our best to live up to that high calling. Having said that, it is inevitable that we will fail to live up to the high calling of God. It is only when we acknowledge our inability, our complete weakness and our dependence upon God, that the Spirit of God will exhibit God's power, and infuse our lives in ways that we cannot imagine.

Yes, "I am free to do anything" was a favorite slogan of the Corinthians. It's tempting to take that slogan and use it as our own. But our Scripture lesson for today is Paul's response that says, "Not so fast, folks. Your body is a *temple* that holds God's Holy Spirit and as such you have an obligation to live within that

reality. The salvation given to us by God calls us to live in this world demonstrating the higher expectations placed upon us as followers of Jesus."

Closing prayer: God of love, we live in you and you in us. Thank you for the gift of this love. Help us to live lives of faith and integrity so that we might be models of godliness in this world. Amen.

"When we consider our bodies as temples where God's Spirit dwells, the idea of using them to oppress others becomes anathema. If my body and your body are both homes of the Divine, we are called to treat them with gentleness and care. (pg 35 from Gathered into One—Devotions for Lent)