

Of all the early churches mentioned in the New Testament, the Corinthian church was the one most plagued by division and strife and controversy. It was polarized in numerous different ways. Much of Paul's correspondence with them is about overcoming these divisions.

Case in point is today's Epistle from 1Cor ch8. Paul is dealing with a problem we don't have: whether Christians could eat meat sacrificed to idols in a pagan temple.

I preached on this problem pretty thoroughly 3 years ago. A quick recap.

Most pagan temples had left over meat after animals were sacrificed. Most of them had their own butcher shops and sold the excess meat to the townspeople.

The Corinthian church was divided up on two different sides over the question of whether Christians could eat meat from these pagan temple butcher shops.

To make a long story short, one group said, "Pagan gods are idols. Idols are not real. Therefore the meat had been sacrificed to something that was really nothing. So buying and eating this meat was no problem for Christians. Besides, these shops were often the only meat markets in town. It'd be a hardship to find meat elsewhere. So dig in and enjoy.

The other group said, no--it's a slippery slope. If they compromised with paganism here it'd lead to worse things later. Besides, many of them were recovering pagans who had converted to Christianity. To have them eat meat from a pagan temple would be like having a recovering alcoholic hanging out at a bar--just not a good idea. So they said, draw a sharp, clear line, and avoid anything that even suggests paganism.

In response to these 2 options, Paul agreed with the first group--they were correct theologically--pagan idols were not real. Eating the meat was no problem in and of itself.

But he also said, correct knowledge is not enough. In his words, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."¹

He said basically, 'The food doesn't matter. It's of no consequence. It's neutral. You're no better off if you eat it and no worse off if you don't.'²

But, he also said that he didn't want former pagans to be put in a position by his eating this meat that made them eat it and think they were worshipping their former pagan god again. Thus love was more important than correct knowledge or theology.

Paul is saying that the most important thing not whether I'm allowed to do something, not whether it is right or wrong. It's whether I'm acting in love.

It doesn't matter what I know. It doesn't matter what I think. Knowledge and opinions are fine, and can even be good. But they don't trump love. I have to act in a way that

¹ 1Cor 8:1

² 1Cor 8:8

seeks the best for my brothers and sisters who may not share my knowledge or opinions. Love is the most important thing. And a few chapters later, in ch13, Paul will speak eloquently about the importance of love. We often hear these words at weddings:

"If I do not have love, I am nothing."³

"Love does not insist on it's own way."⁴

'Knowledge will end,' but 'love never ends.'⁵

"Faith, hope, and love abide," or last forever, "and the greatest of these is love."⁶

We have lost this in our country, in our culture. My opinions are always far more important than loving you. My rights are far more important than doing anything for you out of love.

We now live in a hyper-polarized country. Gone are the days when Ronald Regan and Tip O'Neill would hang out together and have drinks after a long day of political wrangling.

Now we're into demonizing opponents. When Bill Clinton was in office, you'd hear from the right wing that he was practically the anti-Christ. Then when George W. Bush succeeded him, you'd hear similar things from the far left. And now with the current incumbent, it's not enough to disagree with him. We have folks on the fringes who question his citizenship, who claim that he's not even an American.

And here we sit, in a hyperpolarized country and culture, in the Episcopal Church, a church that prides itself on being a big tent. Our church prides itself on being a place where people of different persuasions can come together and worship the living God together, in common, with common prayer. It doesn't matter if you're Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, a Tea Partier or a 99-percenter, black or white, gay or straight--all are welcome to come and worship the Living God, to come to his table, and to be fed with Christ's Body and Blood. We are all one in Christ Jesus. And we're called to love one another.

"Love one another, as I have loved you" Jesus commanded us.

"Love the Lord your God... and love your neighbor as yourself."

So how do we love and live together in love in the midst of a hyper-polarized culture? I'd like to offer you something I learned in seminary. I have found it to be very helpful over the years.

It comes from Theology. It is a Greek philosophical term, "Adiaphora." A-D-I-A-P-H-O-R-A. Its literal meaning is "things which are indifferent." Things that are neither right nor wrong. In the Greek sense, what Paul was talking about today is adiaphora: "We are no worse off if we do not eat (meat), and no better off if we do."

³ 1Cor 13:2

⁴ 1Cor 13:5

⁵ 1Cor 13:8

⁶ 1Cor 13:13

But adiaphora also has a Christian sense. When used theologically, adiaphora means things that are not central to the faith. They may or may not be important. But they're not central to the faith. There are very minor things that are adiaphora: whether you use grape juice or wine at communion, whether or not you make the sign of the cross when you pray.

But there are major things that are also adiaphora. And this includes a number of what we would call hot-button issues in our society. Whether you're for or against same-sex unions. Whether you are pro-life or pro-choice. Good Christians can disagree about such issues and still be good Christians. They can differ and still come to God's table together. And that is a very tough concept in a hyper-polarized culture.

But as Paul and Jesus would tell us, love for each other trumps whether or not you have the right opinion or knowledge.

Of course there are some things that are too central to be adiaphora: whether God is the maker of heaven and earth, whether Jesus Christ is Lord. Those are things Christians must agree on to be good Christians. One of the reasons we use the Nicene Creed is to summarize many of the things that are central and important and essential. But other matters, even hot-button matters, are adiaphora. The concept of adiaphora is one of the most important things I learned in seminary.

Adiaphora has been helpful over the years in trying to navigate through the minefields we find ourselves in these days. And it is a tough world to navigate.

I've been ordained almost 17 years now. Except for the reformation, I can't think of a more contentious 17 year period in the history of the Anglican and Episcopal Church. It has been a strain, even in big tent church, to keep things together. And, if I'm honest with myself, sometimes I've been more helpful at holding things together, and at others I've probably tugged at the seams some myself.

Y'all didn't know me 10 to 15 years ago. Younger priest, early 30's, VERY sure of myself. You probably wouldn't be surprised to know that I had a very high view of the importance of scripture, as I still do today. But in seminary, and in my earlier years as a priest, I was very gung-ho and almost prideful that I had the CORRECT view of scripture. What Paul was talking about in terms of emphasizing knowledge, that was me.

I was right of center, as I still am today. In the context of West Texas, being right of center makes me look like a moderate. But in the context of Kansas, it made me look like a conservative. And in the context of seminary in Chicago, classmates thought I was to the right of Rush Limbaugh.

As you're probably aware, one of the tough issues in the 1990's and early 21st century has been the issue of the appropriateness of having gay or lesbian clergy, and the appropriateness of blessing same-sex unions. I used to take a pretty firm and public stand against both. And I took my church in Kansas down that rabbit hole as well. And in the process, we inflicted wounds on some gay and lesbian folks who had attended our church.

I was also heavily involved in diocesan and national church politics. And I voted thumbs down when these issues came up for a vote. I was in Minneapolis in 2003 when the question of whether openly gay priest, Gene Robinson, should be allowed to serve as the Bishop of New Hampshire. I voted thumbs down. But I was not in the majority.

In fact, that night I was angry and depressed. I thought the Episcopal Church had gone to hell in a hand-basket. The next morning I work up, still fuming. I decided I was going to boycott the morning Eucharist. But then I was showered and dressed, and there was plenty of time to go over the convention center in time for the service. So I told myself to put on my big-boy pants and I went over.

Eucharist at General Convention is a huge affair. Almost 2,000 people are sitting around round tables on a huge convention floor. After the sermon each day, you had discussions with the people at your table, and you stayed at the same table the whole week-and-a-half. Each table had a few clergy, a bishop, and several lay people.

As I walked into the room I thought about one of the other priests at our table. He was an openly gay priest from another diocese. He and I had butted heads, and had had a pretty heated discussion a few days before. I figured he would be on cloud 9 that morning, and I really didn't want to deal with him. So I kept walking across the huge convention floor and left the room by another door.

After a few minutes later I thought, "This is silly." I went back into the room and walked towards our table. But then I veered off and went out a different direction through yet another door. This time I was in the exhibit hall and looked around for a few minutes.

But again I decided to go back in for Eucharist. And again after walking a little ways into the room, I decided I couldn't do it. But I was running out of doors to exit from. I didn't want use the same door twice. What if someone I knew saw me and wondered what I was doing?

So I decided to duck behind the bleachers that were set up along one wall and take a more hidden way out. I later called this whole time "the time I left the Episcopal Church for 10 minutes."

But then the organ started playing the opening hymn. <hum> It was one of my favorites. I knew the words intimately even though no one was singing yet. I would often recite the first line to myself as a short prayer upon getting out of bed each morning. And that hymn made me stop. I had a moment of crystal clarity. I realized in an instant, "You're worried about adiaphora. All this debate, all this pain, all this angst, it's over adiaphora. It is NOT central to the faith. What the hymn is talking about IS central to the faith."

And so I turned and walked back out from behind the bleachers. And I was walking onto the convention floor, I joined my voice with my fellow Episcopalians. I joined with all of them, the ones I agreed with and the ones I disagreed with. And we sang God's praises together:

"When morning gilds the skies
My heart awaking cries
May Jesus Christ be praised!
When evening shadows fall
this rings my curfew call
MAY JESUS CHRIST BE PRAISED!"⁷

Worshipping the living God, worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ was central. Gay bishops, same sex unions, and other disagreements, that was adiaphora.

And when I got to our table, the only space open was next to the gay priest I had butted heads with. And as the hymn ended, he leaned over and said, "I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you to come here today. I'm so glad you're here."

Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.

Jesus didn't command us, "Defend the faith, keep my doctrine pure." He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus never said, "Make sure to protect all of God's commandments and make sure no one ever breaks any of them." He said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you... That you love one another as much as I have loved you."

When I stand before my Lord, he is not going to judge me based on purity of doctrine. He is not going to judge me on how stridently I've defended the faith. He is not going to judge me based on how well I've preserved morality or law, how well I've defended scripture or kept the church pure and free from sin.

Instead, he is going to ask me, "Have you loved? Have you loved your neighbor? Have you loved me? Have you loved your fellow Christians as much as I have loved you?"

It's not about all my knowledge. It's not about how righteous or self-righteous I have been.

It's about whether I have loved.

A decade ago I would have erred on the side of being correct. Now I hope I err on the side of being loving.

I used to err on the side of law. Now I hope I err on the side of grace.

Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.

⁷ *The Hymnal 1982*, #427

That's why I stay in the Episcopal Church. That's why I continue to raise my children in the Episcopal Church. It's a place where we can love each other in spite of our differences. It's a place where we can come together and worship the Lord Jesus Christ, despite our differences.

It's a place where we can find concord. Concord. Literally hearts together. Trying to love each other as much as Jesus loves us. And praising his holy name together.

That makes this place very special in a world that is fractured and polarized. Let us treasure what we have.

"Ye nations of mankind
in this your concord find
May Jesus Christ be praised!
Let all the earth around
ring joyous with the sound
May Jesus Christ be praised!"⁸

⁸ *The Hymnal 1982*, #427