**“Freedom but Love”**

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

 Epiphany 4

From 1st Corinthians, the 8th chapter: “Take care that this right of freedom does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience, you sin against Christ.”

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord, and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Bridge

We live in a country that bestows upon its people a plethora of great **freedom**. And when we, then, find freedoms infringed upon, it is **for that preservation** that we fight. It is noteworthy how we celebrate the freedom of “**independence**” with it a “Bill of **Rights**”, for us **national treasures that are spelled out in explicit detail**. **Rights** **in freedom** seem to be what **most moves Americans** …

… which is a **corporate treasure for all in this country**, and yet it is its ultimate goal of “**INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS**” to where the **joint offer** **leads**.

Scripture says (**a good bit differently**) that while God’s Gospel grants an eternal freedom that literally is the **ULTIMATE FREEDOM** because it frees for beyond this life and world, **exercising any freedoms with fierce abandon UPON the sensibilities of people in this world** can be **unloving** … and, as our Epistle calls it: “**sinful against Christ” since He expressed and expects of His people a focus that’s opposite of that**. **HE LOVED (AND INSISTS THAT WE LOVE) OVER AND ABOVE OUR OWN RIGHTS AND INTERESTS**. The text talks of “**weakness**” within humanity and, maybe even, an **over-sensitivity about things that may not need to burden us**, and yet **doesn’t** **allow any of us to thrust freedoms into an environment where that expression could give another offense**.

**Text**

“Considering **food offered to idols**”. For the context of the city of Corinth, food got offered to idols in Pagan worship sites, then sold through the markets to any who wanted even that food in the among the groceries of their home. Early Christians thought that shopping at the “Market of the Leftovers of Zeus” was a sacrilege. For a Christian to wander through grocery stores and fill their carts with the fruits that (the day before) lay upon a pagan altar, that was “eating of Hell”.

Well, in the purest of **freedoms**, Zeus doesn’t exist so a banana under a Zeus altar is only just a banana, yet I wouldn’t be comfortable chewing on it. Paul reminded earlier that “All things are, certainly, **lawful** for me (at least many things) however not all things are **helpful**”, To the “have it your way” temptations in the TV commercials of even Paul’s time, he let us know how he’d apply the premise of freedom: “**If food makes my brother (or, for that matter, even me) stumble, I will never eat meat lest I make my brother (or myself) stumble**.” His point was: what Christians “**can**” do physically and what we “**should** **do**” are (**quite often**) **two different things**.

I remember the application of this when I took a group from here on a field trip to Nashville’s Hindu Temple (as part of our studies in Worldviews and how others perceive of things). Their pagan statues (idols) got worshipped with the offering of fruits to them (people brought bananas and the priests laid those bananas at the feet of the statues) as an expression of personal worship and homage. If a Christian **“tourist” were inclined to be arrogant / “puffed up in their knowledge” and disrespectful in that** as Paul called it), any **could, physically, have** grab from there a banana there and peal it open and take a bite. I’m pretty certain that the priests that might see this would let that happen, but it probably would be possible that someone could physically be that offensive.

Would eating such a banana cause a Christian “**eternal indigestion**”? **Maybe and maybe probably not**, yet **I wouldn’t try it**. I would never **chance** such a potentially dangerous thing since I don’t think **digesting or even touching idolatry, in any sense,** **me being “weak”**. And I’m, also, conscious of being “respectful” in a Hindu Temple for “the sake of decency” and, I hope, that my “respectfulness” may soften, hopefully, a Hindu heart to begin receiving the joy the Gospel of Jesus offers. I was glad to see that most “tourists” deal “decently” and “respectfully” in a Hindu Temple. I assume also (and would act like I assume this) that any pagan I’d show our sanctuary to would be “decent” and “respectful”. Here’s where, if you’ve never thought about the slogan that I put at the bottom of our bulletins, do please now. “All are **welcome**” (and I’m **absolutely serious about** that and would try to (even if I’d have to force it) be **WELCOMING** **TO** **ANYONE OF ANY CIRCUMSTANCE OR STANCE, EVEN IF IT’S UNCOMFORTABLE TO ME. GUARDING, THOUGH, OF ANY DISRESPECT TO THE PLACE**, for **HERE “CHRIST IS HONORED”**, and enforced whenever it needs to be. And I’m the **first** “**ENFORCER**” where that’s ever necessary (including among us). But **WELCOMING** and **LOVING** is the **proper way to express God’s love in “decency” that’s born of God’s first love for “weak sinners”**.

**Jesus** was revealed (Epiphany language) to be concerned with that as a “**Brother**” to humanity, one made “from among it / us” as is the us that means blacks or whites, those yellow, Chinese or Russian or Arab or Hispanic, **of (technically, as from among) even** misled-yet worshipers of Hinduism or Zeus worshipers. He **became the “every man”** … and **served every man** to the **obedience** **(loving in the ultimate love)** of a **self-sacrificing** death upon a cross.

Jesus **had rights** He did not make use of … nor concerned Himself at all with. The Divine Creator / God by nature, He naturally was and is that of whites and blacks and Russians and Arabs whether anybody knows that or not and yet **He** **never exercised “rights” … just “authority”, which is not the same thing**. Jesus showed only righteous (appropriate) anger in where anyone would disrespect His Father, but His **“authority” respectfully expressed** was when **invited, never coercing it into ears or thrusting His rights to express it into any context**.

Did He offend? Yes, yet that’s the distinction between those who submit to “authority” or not. He offended “weakness”, and forgave it when real healing was asked for / His offense in the **Person “not weak” yet submitting to “weakness” to save it, expressing no self-interest to save Himself**. His purpose wasn’t even to offend Pharisees, just be honest with them in defense of His Father when asked by them to respond, and giving one an entire night of loving and gentle expression and conversation where and how that conversation got sought by that man, Nicodemus … for Nicodemus.

**Application**

“Considering **food offered to idols**”, and lot of **American interest and modern society things** **these days (and maybe especially our things even these days)** fit that category. Oodles of idols I think we worship as Americans. They’re in lots of places (and places no doubt close to home) and our culture doesn’t restrict them but rather holds the right to **encourage them as freedoms to be fought for. Selfish quests to CONSUME WHATEVER WE WANT is promoted … it’s the American way called “the pursuit of happiness”** …

… and the retail markets and restaurants are designed to encourage an even-religious offering to “tastes”. Consuming food offered to idols happens where the marketplace designs it to happen, and even Christians (“weak”) direct incorrect cravings toward feeding an almost worshipful hunger.

**God’s Church has always tried to give people an alternative** in recognition of human “weakness”, something that guards against marketplace temptations by, at least, **seeming purposefully** different than a selfishly consuming marketplace. A Divine Service has been passed to us from way before we ever came around, and that’s been to exercise a higher calling, not like **any secular world’s offer through a “pop” culture, but a different one with a** **distinct (and even countercultural /** “**OTHER**”) **way of worshiping by receiving a** Good that’s not of this fallen world, but rather **from out of this world … “in it, but clearly not of it” by intent**. The Church is deliberate and careful to be not flippant in “honoring Christ”. It’s something we try to being explaining in each week’s bulletin (in that boxed section expounding on the “Honoring Christ” intent). …..

This is not an easy request of the Lord. It ask of us the **sacrifice of just personal (and CONSUMPTIVE) SATISFACTION OF WANTS for the Good of even our own “weak” nature yet also that of the journeys of others toward (hopefully) God’s love for them in Jesus**. Not everything I want is Godly, so I’m reminded not to pray “**my** will be done”, but “**God’s**” and that, always, my words and thoughts would be **pleasing to Him** and **eternally beneficial to me and my neighbors**. Picking up **our** “**crosses**” after Jesus who took up His means (most particularly) the **sacrifice of self to a greater Good of God and a helpfulness for Him to others**.

May we be **conscious and guarded about how we exercise even Christian freedom**, that **we not ever harm the process toward God that we, “weak” ourselves need to be in, nor that of others headed God’s direction**. In +Jesus’ name. Amen. Now may the peace of God that passes all human understand keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.