

**Weekend of Sunday, January 31, 2021**  
**4th Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 4/Proper X/Year B**  
**First Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20**  
**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**  
**Gospel Reading: Mark 1:21-28**  
**Sermon Title: “Trifling”**

**Theme**

*Paul is concerned about the way some Corinthian Christians use their freedom in Christ as license to engage in non-Christian behavior that sets a damaging example to other, impressionable believers. Christians have a responsibility to each other that their behavior does not cause another to sin.*

**Text**

<sup>1</sup>Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup>Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; <sup>3</sup>but anyone who loves God is known by him.

<sup>4</sup>Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” <sup>5</sup>Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—<sup>6</sup>yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

<sup>7</sup>It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. <sup>8</sup>“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. <sup>9</sup>But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup>For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?

<sup>11</sup>So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. <sup>12</sup>But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup>Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

## Sermon

I believe it was the winter of 1980 when one of my brothers invited me to go on a spring break trip with him and his buddies. I was home that quarter while working a co-op job, and as I learned later, the only reason he invited me was that he wanted me to borrow my parent's full-size Chevy van and their camping equipment for the trip and drive it down to Oxford, Ohio, to collect him and his buddies.

Our destination was not just Florida, we were going all the way to Key West. None of us had much money and none of us had credit cards in those days. So we pooled our cash and off we went. I will skip all the sordid details and tell you we made it to Key West. If you've never been there, every night there is a carnival atmosphere on the dock as a crowd gathers to watch the sunset.

Among the "entertainers" there every night was the Hare Krishna's. They were there in their long white robes and shaved heads banging drums, dancing and singing "Hare Krishna" over and over again, and when they were done they brought out these pails of cold vegetarian soup that we nicknamed "gruel" and fed anyone who wanted to eat it. Well, my mates and I had other uses for our money, so yes, we ate Hare Krishna gruel every night.

Now you may be wondering why I told you that rather uninteresting story. It is because of the reading from 1 Corinthians in which Paul was responding to a disagreement within the fellowship of the Corinthian church. And that disagreement had to do with the eating of food offered to idols. No, the Hare Krishna gruel wasn't offered to idols, but it was still Hare Krishna gruel.

Here is some background. Corinth was a very cosmopolitan community with temples to many pagan gods. Just as in Judaism in the Temple back in Jerusalem, many of the religious practices of the pagan religions included the practice of animal sacrifice. In some rituals, the meat offered and burned on the altar was consumed as part of the cultic meal, and the remainder of the beast was sold in the meat market.

At issue for the Corinthians was that they were mostly converts to Christianity from those pagan religions and some of the people enjoyed those cultic meals and continued to participate in them, not as believers but as revelers. We can

understand this. Youngstown is made up of many ethnic communities and just because we go to the Jewish Food Fest at the Kravitz Deli, doesn't mean we are Jewish.

But I think we would agree, the leftover meat from an animal that had been sacrificed to some pagan god is a different thing, no "trifling" matter.

You are familiar with the term, "trifling" aren't you? When I lived and worked in North Carolina, I learned some new vocabulary. I've entitled this sermon, "Trifling" and if you don't know what that means, then I'll tell you. It's the behavior of one who is just always stirring stuff up that doesn't really matter. They speak half-truths about everything and anything to anybody. Never enough that they have to defend it, or get disciplined for it, but just enough to be a constant irritant. Often times the issue about which they irritate others doesn't really matter – its *trivial*. Maybe you know someone like that. Down south, the people would say, "Oh, don't pay no mind to them, they're just *trifling*."

Back to Paul's letter to the Corinthians; Was the status of meat sacrificed to idols somehow different to a Christian? Paul resolved the issue once and for all when he wrote,

<sup>4</sup>as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one."

Paul was pretty clear, but I want to be sure we all understand. In a polytheistic culture of Paul very clearly said, there is only one God, the God they worshiped, and the God we worship. But that was not the end of the discussion, as you heard. Paul wrote that this is no *trifling* matter. Christians need to be concerned about the message we give off to others, especially "weak believers." By that he meant, Christians who aren't very secure in their faith who can be easily confused by the actions and behaviors of other Christians.

In the Corinthian community, Christians eating food offered to idols was confusing the "weak believers." Paul's response to that was,

<sup>13</sup>Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

“Well, Pastor, we understand that. That problem doesn't have anything to do with us in our day. Why are you talking about it?” I'm so glad you asked.

This is the third part of a three-part sermon series that I didn't talk up much because the need for it kind of sprang up on me too. Over the last two weeks, I've tried to reach us with a message that is counter to the prevailing message in our culture. It seems to me that we as a culture have gotten to the point where we feel like we can say and do anything we are inclined to.

Again I proclaim my disclosure – the following is not intended to be political.

It is wrong for anyone, especially a person in a position of authority and influence to incite others to break the law. And when one does that, others who are leaders in lesser positions of authority and influence feel compelled to do the same, and the next thing you know, we have a mob on our hands.

I hope that there aren't any among us who think it was a good idea to mob the US Capitol in Washington, break-in, vandalize, and steal the property of the US Government and its representatives. That behavior was not godly, not of Christ, and I think we should be offended that some of those thugs had the nerve to carry Jesus flags as they did their lawless thuggery.

We may or may not think that abortion is abhorrent to God. Blowing up abortion clinics and killing the people who perform them is not the answer, and not of God, and beneath our calling as Christians.

We may or may not think that something has to be done about white supremacy and police violence against black people. Rioting and looting is not the answer, and not of God, and beneath our calling as Christians.

We may or may not think that jokes at the expense of blacks, or blonde women, or people with handicaps or mental illness or any other segment of the population are funny, but they are not funny to them, and not of God, and beneath our calling as Christians.

When people claiming to be Christians behave in an un-Christian manner, they embarrass themselves, all Christians, the Church and Christ himself. "Weak believers" are left confused, or maybe turn away from Christ and his church all

together, and it fuels the rhetoric of those who have always been opposed to religious belief systems, especially Christianity.

What we can learn from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is that the actions we take, no matter how innocent we think they are aren't *trifling*. They matter, because someone is watching. It could be your kids. It could be a new Christian. It could be a seeker, someone seeking answers, seeking God. Just imagine them watching from a distance, because honestly, that's what I would do if I was a seeker, and then seeing us Christians behaving in a way that is contrary to the way of Christ of scripture.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Well, I think maybe we all *trifle* a little bit. I believe I probably do. Let's make a covenant, you and I. Let's be more conscious of our behavior and our speech. We may think it's just *trifling*. We may even think it's noble – I've heard people brag about having "no filter" as if that is a good thing. It's not. We should always attempt to try to rise up from our sinful caveman nature.

Two weeks ago I asked you, "Who will you follow?" I told you unambiguously that the Christian makes Jesus Christ their example of godly living and knows him so well through the study of scripture that they know how he would act given any situation, and that informs the Christian's life.

Last week we had two examples of behavior; "Jonah or Jesus?" I told you unambiguously that the Christian models their life after Jesus Christ who chose the path of obedience to his Father's will, and the Christian will do that too, even if it is not what the Christian wants personally.

Today I am pointing out to us that when we recite that Creed that we recite every other weekend (but ironically, not this weekend) and claim his name as our own, that is the name "Christian," that we are to turn our back on our selfish selves, and our own ideas of what is right and wrong, and turn toward the one who gave himself for the sins of ALL. Not just we white middle-class Americans, but ALL people. We don't get to choose who Christ died for, God did that.

Having been reminded of that, let's slow down, take a breath, and think before we speak or act. Our actions are not just our own. They represent him whose name we take as our own when we claim to be Christian.

Because I am conscious that this sermon also sounds like a scolding again, let me remind you that the opposite is also true. When we claim to be Christian, and our speech and actions are shaped by Christ's example, then whatever we do, we will be *glorifying God* as we do it.

Maybe *glorifying God* is the opposite of *trifling*, I don't know. But wouldn't it be a great thing to be said about us? "Look at that will you, he or she is *glorifying God* over there, doing *whatever!*"

### **Prayer**

Merciful God, you gave us your Son Jesus as a model of godly living, and yet we are slow to learn from him. You could demand our lives at any time, and yet you are patient with us. We thank you for your patience, but our one desire is to do better. Send us your Holy Spirit to remind us every moment of our lives, that we are yours, and we can glorify you by living godly lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen