

## **Sermon: The Love of Idols**

Year B, Epiphany 4

[Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28](#)

Offered January 28, 2018 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

OK, we've got an annual meeting to get to, a lot of important work to do today. And a yummy potluck lunch, so let's work with this piece of scripture about eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols and move on.

Here's the context. In Roman communities, like Corinth, there were two kinds of sacrifices: private and public.<sup>1</sup> Either way, the gods the sacrifice was offered to got some of the meat, usually the bits that humans don't like to eat.<sup>2</sup> The priests also got a share of the meat in recognition of their role.<sup>3</sup>

If it was a private sacrifice, the person providing the animal got the rest. Usually that would be cooked and shared with invited guests. In a society which was as heavily reliant on networks, on who you knew, dinner parties were more than social gatherings. They were the fuel that the economy ran on. So not going or not eating what you were served had practical risks far greater than they would be today.

Public sacrifices would send the meat that didn't go to the gods or the priests to the markets. So even if you bought meat from a store, you couldn't really be sure it hadn't also been part of a sacrifice to an idol.

Finally, in a culture that believed in demons (right, Jesus was always exorcising demons), one of the ways demons got into a person was through the meat they ate.<sup>4</sup> One of the ways to keep demons out of the food was to call upon a benevolent god to bless the animal before it was slaughtered.<sup>5</sup>

So pretty much, unless you raised the animal yourself, all the meat you encountered had been involved with some god or another. And yet as a Christian, you believed in the one God, the creator of heaven and earth, and you rejected all other Gods. That's why Christians were such a challenge to Rome. When Rome conquered a community, they never made people stop worshipping their own gods. They just had to add the Roman gods to the mix and show up at public worship. Rome had even made an exemption to that practice for the Jews, for whom that would not work. Part of why the early Christians declared themselves descended from Judaism, and not a whole new religion, was to qualify for the exemption the Jews received. But the Christians weren't a tribe or an ethnic clan that could be identified, like the Jews, and they wouldn't worship the Roman gods. So they didn't fit in the Roman model of community.

So eating meat went right into the heart of this tangle. And it was a tangle. Plus the church at Corinth, to whom Paul is writing this letter, was also a tangle. It had all sorts of factions which were fighting with each other, over money and power, over sex and over food. It was a perfect reality TV show. There would have been a bidding war from the cable channels.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Barclay, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Barclay, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Barclay, 72.

One of the factions in the Corinthian church asks Paul to resolve this eating-meat-sacrificed-to-idols question. They argue that there are no other gods. Just the one true God. So there's no danger to Christians in eating the meat. All the other gods from all the points in the supply chain aren't real. Whatever rituals have been performed involving those gods and the animals or meat are meaningless, because the gods don't exist. It's a total intellectual argument. Pure logic. Everyone see the logic of it?

So Paul steps in and says, basically, "You're right. When you're right, you're right." He doesn't argue with the logic. In this time when we can't seem to agree on basic facts, basic logic, when we can't agree that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, notice what Paul does. He says the logic is correct, they have thought their way through the problem clearly and correctly. But he doesn't say, "and here is how to make your argument more forcefully, more convincing."<sup>6</sup> He says, "Your argument isn't loving enough. These people may be confused, but your argument isn't doing enough to keep them connected with Jesus Christ. Yes, we are just talking about food, and food isn't going to matter one way or another, so rather than insist on being intellectually right, step back and decide what's more important. Being right or remaining connected to one another and to Jesus."

And how perfect a message is that on the day of Annual Meeting. It's not enough to be right, you have to be loving too. There's a danger in hearing that as the message, though, and I want to lift up that danger.

I'm wearing my robe today. I got it for my installation back in 2015. I drove down to Old Greenwich, CT in the week when the Pope was coming to New York. Anyway, the roads around Manhattan were crazy, with delivery trucks all trying to get stuff into New York City before it shut down for 40 hours. It was wild. I drove down to CM Almy's little store front. On one side were all the Protestant vestments, black, grey, white. On the other side were all the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopalian vestments, ruby, emerald, amethyst, gold, sapphire. Yeah, there was a moment of serious coveting going on, even if that's against the 10 Commandments. Anyway, they took my measurements to make my robe in Maine. It's called a Geneva gown, because it's in the style of the robes worn by the early Protestant reformers, like John Calvin, who were based in Geneva. So this robe, velvet facing, wool blend, fancy pockets to handle wireless microphones, black piping, could have had red piping, but went with black, those New England Puritan genes are tough, this robe costs \$800. The bag I carry it around in cost \$80.

When you are in seminary, or just graduating from it, that is all the money in the world. You can get robes for less. But they look it. And if you are already a little anxious about getting up and preaching, wearing something that doesn't fit, or makes you too hot, or has sleeves that might set you on fire is not good at reducing your anxiety.

So I had not bought my robe before 2015, although I had had plenty of circumstances where I could have or many should have worn one. When I was serving in Newburyport, Chris, the minister many of you met at my installation, had to be away and he arranged for a colleague to do pulpit supply. We were getting ready for worship. She asked if I was putting on my robe and I had to explain I didn't have one. She said, "you might want to think about that."

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<sup>6</sup> Clarence T. Craig, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians: Exegesis," vol. 10 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953), 94.

And because God is loving and kind and living in the heart of this world, instead of saying that I had thought about it and I didn't have the money and it was a sore spot for me and thanks so very much for bringing it up, I just said, "How come?" She said it was because a robe gave a congregation one less thing to judge you on. That she always dressed professionally when she led worship. One day she had worn red high heels that went with her outfit. And a portion of the congregation could not get past them. For months afterwards they kept bringing them up. She finally had to leave that church, not just because of the red high heels, but honestly that was part of it.

I may be wrong, but if I wore red high heels in worship, some of you would not notice, some of you would notice and tease me about them, some of you would notice and raise your eyebrows. We would talk about them and your reaction to them. But none of you would be talking about them months later, knowing that it hurt my feelings. So in that sense, the red high heels are just a modern version of meat sacrificed to idols. Let love trump logic.

But I think of those red shoes and I think they let us to get closer to Paul's message than a lamb chop. I don't know what those people thought about those red high heels on a woman minister. But I can imagine. In my imagination, for members of her church, those shoes pointed to something that was not faithful, was not bringing them closer to Jesus Christ. In my imagination, they saw a logical connection between red high heels and something that increased the distance between them and God.

The danger of reading today's message from Paul as "love trumps logic" is that we censor ourselves and think, "Well that will hurt someone's feelings. Even if I think it's true, I'm not going to say it." I think Paul's saying, "Speak truth." And I think he's saying "Speak truth and watch for the impact of your truth on the community around you."<sup>7</sup> So that's the first thing.

The second thing I think Paul is saying is "Don't let your truth become an idol."<sup>8</sup> Whatever those red high heels meant to that portion of the congregation, they were going to hold on to that truth regardless of what it did to the community they were a part of. They were going to hold on to those red shoes more tightly than they were going to hold onto the love of neighbor and the love of God. If you pressed and pried, and challenged them with love, they would probably come up with phrases about pride going before destruction or licentiousness or being rooted in somber tradition. It might sound like Scripture, it might easily be quotes from Scripture, but there would be a love of being right that completely swamped the love of neighbor and the love of God.

Finally, this may be hard to see, but I think it's there and I think this is why this text is an Epiphany text, when we are celebrating God's unexpected presence in this world. I think Paul is saying, "Don't let Jesus Christ become an idol."<sup>9</sup> Don't let all your logic, and study, and intellectual prowess of thinking your way to God through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, don't let any of that turn Jesus into an idol. At the very beginning of the passage, Paul says

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<sup>7</sup> V. Bruce Rigdon, "Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Pastoral Perspective, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 306.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, "Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Theological Perspective, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 304.

<sup>9</sup> Robbins, 306.

*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. (1 Corinthians 8:1-3)* For Paul, the knowledge that's important is being known by God. God sent Jesus into this world that we might be known by God. God sent the Holy Spirit into this world so that we may experience being known and loved by God, here, today, now.

Nothing should keep us from experiencing that love, not meat, not red high heels, not someone else's perfectly formed logic. Nothing. As we work together in Annual Meeting, speak your truths. Say what you think is true and right. But don't let your truths become your idol. And don't let your intellectual understanding of what Jesus expects of us in this world to drown out the new experiences Jesus is offering us today, now, in this world. We have a whole loving community struggling to find our way closer to God in this world. We have a whole loving community working together to help each other articulate what it means to be so loved, so known by God in this world. It may mean being a vegetarian. It may mean wearing red high heels. It may mean doing something this church has never done before. But it definitely means not being caught in worshipping our own idols, however lovingly constructed. It means embracing God's love as it appears in this world today.