

“MY LITTLE LIGHT, YOUR LITTLE LIGHT!”

Living a Holy Life in an Unholy World (3)

Readings: *Psalm 111, Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28, 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13*
Preached at First Presbyterian Church, Baldwin, NY, January 29th 2012

As Christian people we are not 'finished articles' but 'works in progress'. None of us can claim to have yet become everything that God wants us to be or to perfectly exemplify the life of Jesus Christ. And as 'works in progress' we are all at different stages of development. As a community of God's people it is an incredibly important thing to recognize that about each other. None of us has all the knowledge or all the insight or the total view on reality that God has upon our lives together.

That is not to say that none of us has anything. On the contrary, God has blessed us all in as many different ways as we are different people. God has given us each all a little light to shine. 'You've got yours and I've got mine. You let yours shine, I let my shine. Shine 'em all together it's going to be fine.' Right? No. Wrong.

When I pastored in West Virginia I was the moderator for a couple of churches that didn't have an installed pastor. Basically that meant having to visit them once every couple of months to moderate their session meetings. One time I entered the fellowship hall of a little church in Colcord, WV, and was startled to hear a loud beeping noise coming from their kitchen. Upon investigation it was emanating from a fire alarm box that had a red light flashing with the message "Action Needed" written underneath.

One of the session members arrived and set about solving the problem. "Action Needed". Press the reset button. No, that didn't work. Was there an overload on the electric supply? Had the battery gone flat? It had been real cold, had a pipe burst or something flooded? Was there a fuse out? As people arrived, various suggestions were put forward.

Eventually one of them tried turning the mains power on and off at the breaker box and that did the trick. We think the box was trying to tell us that the power had gone off earlier that day and it was necessary to check what had happened to various electrical devices when the power had been restored.

In this morning's reading from 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Paul used the word 'conscience' a number of times. (In verses 8, 10 and 12). In Greek the word for conscience is *syneidēsis*. I'm continuing today on the theme of "Living a Holy Life in an Unholy World".

Paul suggests that people have their own individual *syneidēsis*. He describes some as having a weak *syneidēsis*, some as having a strong *syneidēsis*. This 'moral conscience', this *syneidēsis*, functions as a sort of internal red light, a moral scanner that is set off when a contemplated action arises doubt. It is the moral equivalent of an 'action needed' light.

The other word that Paul uses a lot in this passage is "knowledge". (verses 1-3, verse 10-11). For each of us Paul suggests that the way our little internal red light, our *syneidēsis*, our moral conscience, works, is closely connected to how we understand the world around us, and how we relate to others.

Paul is talking about how a community that is committed to following Jesus Christ should come to their moral decisions. He is writing about how best we can live in a way that encourages others to be faithful disciples. The particular issue he uses as a 'Case Study' is that of "Food offered to idols". Maybe not a burning issue to most of us, but a thorny problem for the Corinthians.

We know from archeological evidence how downtown Corinth was laid out. Let's say you're a Corinthian citizen. It's Saturday afternoon and you are off downtown to get the shopping from the market. What would the area be like? You come into town by the Laecheum Road. On your right would be the theatre, in front of the theatre, the market. If you were after some recreation you headed through the Propylea, a monumental arch that was the entrance to the Forum area.

In the Forum area not only would you find an office selling tickets for the Isthmian Games, a baths, some restaurants and taverns and a number of administrative and governmental buildings, but also 5 temples dedicated to different gods. One would be to Aphrodite, another to Apollo or Athens. By far the largest building in the whole Forum area would be the Temple of the Imperial Cult where you could offer worship and offerings to emperors past and present.

When you went shopping to the market or ate meat in one of the restaurants, often the stall or the eating-place would be dedicated to a particular deity or god, the food having come through the temple they identified with. The same would happen when you went out to dinner. "Today's steak is bought to you by Apollo, Healthy Food for healthy men". "Get a little romance in your life by tasting our Aphrodite Chicken!"

It was customary in some way or other to dedicate the food on offer to a deity or god that Christians recognized as being an idol. As people became Christians and they started to place their lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, every time they went out to eat or on a shopping trip to the Mall, their little internal red lights would start flashing, "Action needed, Action needed', We're not supposed to be honoring idols, we're supposed to be honoring God".

Paul begins chapter 8 with the words "*Now, concerning things offered to idols*". His overall concern is building up the community of believers, rather than speaking to any particular individual. The first thing he does is warn them that knowledge can be a dangerous thing if used in a selfish way.

"*Knowledge*" he says can make you puffed up and arrogant, but "*love*"... love builds things up. And when you have a love for God then you can be sure that God is going to guide you and help you through these decisions in a way that works best for everybody.

He then talks about the idols and the way different people of faith had their red lights firing off. Some of them were being "Know-it-alls" and saying, "Well we know that idols don't really exist, so why worry about eating meat that's offered to a deity that was just a figment of people's imagination. After all, Jesus has set us free from worrying about what food we should eat, so we can eat whatever we like".

'Hold on now', says Paul, 'Not only does that sound rather arrogant, but suppose somebody comes along, who's not as sure about their faith as you are, and makes the conclusion that because you are going along with all these prayers that there is something in the reality of those idols? You're actions are going to hurt them.' In verse 9 he plainly says, "*Beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak*".

Most of the new believers in Corinth were not coming out of the belief system that Israel had of just believing in One God. They were in the Gentile World, which suggested a whole pantheon of gods could control your destiny and govern your life. It wasn't easy for them to break that understanding when it was the one they'd been taught by their parents and that dominated the culture around them.

Jiminy Cricket sang, “Always let your conscience be your guide”. The problem was that in Corinth the Christians had warning lights that were guiding them in different directions. Some of them were claiming that their knowledge of things meant they could do stuff that others wouldn’t involve themselves in. But Paul declares in verses 11-12 “*Because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.*”

The teaching in this passage is about a whole lot more than meat offered to idols. It’s about how we relate to all the things in our lives. You can apply it to a whole host of things. Alcohol use, tobacco, the lottery, our driving habits, the way we react when we are wronged, the words that come out of our mouths, the jokes we tell, the courtesy we use to others when we are out and about, relationships at school, at home, at work.

Am I living in a way that is encouraging others to be disciples? Am I prepared “*To yield my spirit to God*” even if it means not doing some things that my freedom in Jesus Christ would make it permissible for me to do.

As Paul’s concern was particularly to build up the community of the church, this passage can be applied particularly to the way we see our church involvement. You know, when you skip a Sunday for anything less than a truly valid reason you are giving out a message that says ‘belonging to the church is not that important’.

If you are able to serve on a committee or perform a particular service to your church and you say, “I don’t have to do that, my salvation doesn’t depend on works, I’m saved by the Grace of God, then... true you are not endangering your salvation... but you are sending out a message that clearly proclaims to others, “My church community doesn’t matter that much”.

If God has blessed you financially and people see that most of your money is invested in your personal fulfillment and only what is left over goes to support your church, then they will conclude that God is only worth your left-overs and not seriously worth investing their lives in when it comes to the real world.

Worship is a lifestyle. In the context of the church it’s a lifestyle that looks, not to self-interest, but to the building of your church community.

‘Paul writes: *Now about meat offered to idols...*’. ‘My little light, your little light.’ May God help us, through the Holy Spirit, to live in a way that not only builds our personal lives but also encourages others to commit their lives to Jesus Christ in the context of belonging to a church community.

To God be the glory.

AMEN.

Rev Adrian Pratt