

1 Corinthians 10: 14-22 “Table of the Lord or Demons?” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/23/22

A story is told out of my old stomping grounds in Kansas City many years ago about a woman who entered a Haagen-Dazs store in the famous downtown Kansas City Plaza. She was in the mood for an ice cream cone, so after enthusiastically making her selection, she turned around to survey the store. Suddenly, she found herself face-to-face with Paul Newman, who was in town filming the movie, Mr. & Mrs. Bridge. He smiled and said hello. Newman’s blue eyes made her knees shake and she stammered out a weak “hello” back. She managed to pay for her cone, then left the shop, heart pounding. When she gained her composure, she realized she didn’t have her much-anticipated ice cream cone. She started back into the store to get and met Newman at the door. He smiled kindly and said, “Are you looking for your ice cream?” She nodded, unable to speak. He responded, “You put it in your purse with your change.”

The story prompts us to consider when was the last time worshipping God brought the same sort of speechless awe into our lives? We live in a world where there is much that can take our breath away, including the spotting of some celebrity or the winning of the lottery, but seldom are we floored by encounters with the Divine. We even have a popular TV show that advocates placing new entertainers at idol status. It isn’t that those American idols are necessarily worshipped but they are certainly deemed as more worthy, more deserving of accolades and praise than the average citizen. So they are placed on a pedestal, as are so many other public figures, which is not necessarily healthy. Our society is good at creating and honoring idols which makes today’s scripture seem as if it could be written to the 21st century as much as it was to the second century. John Bach once said, “Idolatry is really not good for anyone, not even the idols.” Paul would undoubtedly agree as he says to the church at Corinth, “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.” Chapter 10 of Paul’s letter is an extended warning against cycles of idolatry which often get passed from generation to generation. The background of the text is the question as to whether the members of the Corinthian congregation should eat food which has been offered to idols. Corinth, like all cities in the Roman empire, contained many idols. Most of the Gentile population, that is those who weren’t Jews, believed that the idols represented gods and

those devoted to the gods made offerings to them, often which included food. Gentiles typically believed that eating such food offered to a particular idol brought those people into the sphere of the power of that particular god. Additionally, most folks rarely limited themselves to one god but instead visited the temples of multiple gods, making sacrifice to each one. People did so to cover as many religious bases as possible. Eating the food which had been given to a certain god would occur either through temple-sponsored sacred meals or by taking the food home and serving it to the family or by selling it at the marketplace as a way to invoke the favor of the god towards one's business and over those who bought the food and ate it.

So Corinthians came into contact with the food in multiple ways but that became a stumbling block for some, especially those of Jewish background. Judaism believed that the community that worships an idol becomes like that idol, and to eat the food sacrificed to an idol would be to allow that influence to color your way of life. To eat food associated with idol offerings would make real the qualities of life associated with those idols. It takes that euphemism "You are what you eat" to a whole new level. If you are confused how that works, all you have to do is look at fashion magazines or watch reality TV or pay attention to certain politicians to see how their qualities are being mimicked in society. Self-centeredness, injustice, exploitation and violence take center stage as we grow complicit to the values and practices of a broken world. I was confronted with this when I began conversations with vegetarian people of faith over sabbatical. I became suddenly aware that my choice of entrees around the dinner table had an affect on those seeking to live without harming animals, even those animals raised strictly for consumption. It became a question of faith as we talked about the sacred found in each living being. If I believed that it was true that God was found in cows, chickens, lambs and pigs, then what did it say that I would eat meat? I am still in discernment about this whole process but I have diminished my intake of meat and sought to better understand God's call on my life in this regards. This journey is not unlike what those early Christians faced as they navigated societal influence with the practice of their faith.

The message is clear to 21st century Christians - The bigger the better, the faster the better, the more the better. Too many people are spending money they haven't earned to buy things they don't need to impress people they don't even like. We are quick to add the glitter but somehow lost the glow. A parable is told whose truth still rings true today about a reed flute, which was passed down from the time of Moses. Crudely made, the instrument nevertheless produced some of the most wonderful music ever heard which inspired thousands over the years. Then, the priests of the temple decided such an heirloom should be decorated with fine gold to reflect the majesty of its music. But after the gold was applied, the flute only produced flat, metallic tones. A flute which once gave heavenly notes grew flat once it was fashioned into what resembled a flashy idol. This is where idolatry, in whatever shape it takes, becomes anti-stewardship, anti-responsible in its use of resources, and destructive to the harmony in which the instrument was created. Paul is giving us warnings about actions which negate the sacredness of life and only serve to elevate our own desires or wishes. They are warnings just as serious as ones we see posted today like "Smoking can cause heart disease and strokes" or "Choking Hazard" or "Bridge Ices When Wet." Paul posts such warnings to instruct us and remind us how bad habits bring bad endings. Damages to body, soul, and spirit tend to accumulate over time, killing us by a thousand cuts that we stop noticing. A gradual dulling of our spiritual sense lulls into believing we're ok, rather than dying inside.

Our author is warning the Corinthians that by outwardly eating food offered to idols, they not only partner with the attitudes and actions of the people associated with those idols, they also connect with the demons who function against God's ways and will. In Paul's day, demons were among the principalities and powers who function as assistants to Satan. So while the idol itself didn't have real existence in the world, the demons were seen as not only existing but also having real power. They weren't gods but they were trans-human entities who opposed God and tried to wrestle the world away from God. So when the Corinthians ate food offered to idols, they were eating a partnership meal with the demons. It would be like us sharing a meal with Hitler or Putin and thereby expressing our support for their active genocide. It would be like eating at a restaurant that practices human trafficking

as was uncovered in Shasta Lake several years ago or a fast food place that practices an oppressive work ethic and low wages. As I shared last week, sharing a meal in the days of the early church was more than just eating, it was one of the greatest methods of building community and camaraderie that existed. The truth is that human communities make idols out of almost anything. They tend to become like the g(G) they worship. John Calvin was right when he said that the human mind is a veritable and continuous idol factory. Idols are often nothing more than larger versions of ourselves. We can, therefore, eat the food sacrificed to idols at any bank, stock brokerage, cash register, or voting among, and in almost any interaction with people. We treat our own broken values and practices as if they are absolute and make idols with all manners of financial resources. Money, of course, is only one of several interlocking finite entities that we treat as infinite and boundless. In North America, we treat money and other things that we fashion into idols as if they are the basic organizing values of life. So Paul says, "Watch out! Beware! Speed bump ahead! Slow down and proceed with caution." Flee from the worship of idols...do not partner with the demons for you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Proceed with caution. Amen.