

Sins and sensibilities

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20;

1 Corinthians 8:1-13;

Mark 1:21-28

WHERE I GREW up, everybody was pretty much just like me. It was a small, southern community, with a long history, deep roots and consistent Christian morality. The only visible difference was our whiteness or our blackness. Ethically speaking, that's how we saw everything too: white or black, good or bad.

For example, in my household it was abundantly clear that consuming any alcoholic beverage in any amount was a sin for which there was no forgiveness. When I went away to college I noticed that others had vastly different views on the benefits of beer. When I drank a beer while out eating pizza with friends, the word got back home that I had "sinned." My mother and grandmother had a tearful hand-wringing session over the decline of my morality and feared for my future.

I decided to attend a school in the Northeast amongst the Yankees. During the orientation picnic, kegs of beer flowed, faculty and students drank together, and I wondered what kind of hellhole I had stumbled into. It seems laughable now, but it was a trauma to my piety, my understanding of what it meant to be a Christian.

Our ancestors in the faith struggled with a different dilemma. The faith of first-century Christians in the Roman Empire was rooted in Christ, but their living was grounded in Caesar. In cities like Corinth the common marketplace sold meat for a family's evening meal just as markets do today. But in Corinth, the butcher was a priest in service to some Greek or Roman deity. All butchering had religious significance--and the significance was not Christian. Early Christians had different theological views on what was ethical or permissible. Some thought it an insult to Christ to even purchase or consume meat roasted to tickle the nostrils of Zeus. Others said

since Christians didn't believe in Zeus, the meat wasn't sacrificial, just nutritional. We can only imagine what first-century potluck dinners were like. Did they have "meat-consuming" and "meat-refraining" tables? Did they consider one another's faith to be faulty? You bet!

Meat sacrificed to idols was a live issue, in the church for decades and was very much on the mind of John as he wrote his Revelation to the seven churches. It seems that the church as a whole never published a social statement on this issue. Various communities dealt with it in their own context. The Corinthians consulted Paul about it, but in his letter to them he did not make a definitive judgment or take sides. Instead, he deferred to one of the great commandments: Love your neighbor as yourself. It's not about eating meat, Paul counseled; it's about loving others. If bringing a rump roast to the church dinner will singe the edges of your neighbor's faith, then bring a salad instead! One of the ways we love each other and practice hospitality is to respect the sensibilities of others.

I advise my young acolytes to wear "Sunday shoes" instead of athletic shoes when they are serving at the altar. It's not because I think God cares, but because I know some people in the pews care very much. The sight of flashing soles going up to light the candles would so distract some that they would not be able to worship. We defer to one another to allow for a diversity of devotional styles.

This is a very Christian attitude, but it can easily lead us into temptation. In our local congregations and within our denominations we would be on shaky ground if we based every decision on whether or not sensibilities in the group would be insulted by our conclusions. If this had been Paul's counsel about all decisions, the church would not have survived long enough for us to ponder these questions. While I may counsel my acolytes to wear good shoes for the sake of their grandmother's piety, I would not counsel a new family of a different ethnicity not to worship with us because someone in the church might be offended.

We know that the gospel we preach is offensive to the world's sensibilities. The teachings of Jesus go against the grain as much today as they did when first uttered from the Savior's lips. The word we proclaim is multipurpose: it challenges us, comforts us, convicts us, consoles us.

In view of the missionary pastor he was, Paul's intention, I can only assume, was to keep the young struggling church focused on its mission of proclamation and service. How easy it is (Lord, don't we know!) to become sidetracked and divided over less vital issues: what we eat or

drink, the color of the carpet for the sanctuary, who is to head the altar guild. We must be mature in Christ so that the little stuff doesn't defeat us. Know when to give in and when not to give up. Yes, that's easier said than done. But if we fail to stay on this task, our little lights risk extinction and Satan's plan to defeat the church issue by issue, little by little, congregation by congregation, will be one step closer to victory.

Some demons are harmless enough, but others must be cast out with all the authority the church can muster. Christians often disagree about which demons to exorcize and which to tolerate, which is why in this Epiphany time we continue to pray for the Light to dispel all darkness.