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“When Christians Don’t Agree (A Pre-Election Reflection on St. Paul)”  
The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (01/28/2024, Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray, Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. In 1969, the Beatles released a song called Get Back from the Let It Be album and it describes to me a repeated and common impulse that human beings have. The lyric is Get Back to Where You Once Belonged. Get Back, Get Back, that was not on my notes, well done, thank you. It's a little corny, I know, but I felt some energy, especially from the front row. There was like a, the spirit said there was a willingness, so I followed it. This is what Bruce Springsteen's glory days is about, you know, looking back to the past when things were good and when your joints didn't hurt and all these things you want to get back to where you once belonged, get back to the glory days. You do see this a lot in the church as well. In Christianity, you see a desire to get back to the early church. People look at the church today and they see this institution full of corruption, full of hypocrisy, full of all kinds of baggage and they say, we need to get back to that earlier, pure form of Christianity. The history of the churches littered with examples of utopian Christian communities and people said this time will get it right, but they want to get back to these days when everybody had halos and beards and it was just men and it was great. But when you read the New Testament and this is not just the New Testament, the parts after the church gets started, even with the gospels themselves, those stories about Jesus' early ministry when he's calling the disciples into service of this thing,

they don't even know what it's going to be yet. You realize that even from its earliest days, the church was far from pure. Jesus himself always has to say to his own disciples like, oh, hey, how much longer do I have to put up with you? Oh, you of little faith. That's how he talks to the disciples at the beginning and then the things continue. We can talk about anionis and safair, we can talk about Peter for getting the gospel, we can talk about all kinds of things, but there's immorality, there's fake spirituality, there's deception, there's cheating and bickering and turf wars and unchecked ambition and bad theology and self-promotion and theft and bezzlement. It's all there in the pages of the New Testament. So it's not like that, it's more like that, an episode of succession, which frankly, I'm shocked that you've seen it. I am shocked that you would watch this show. Today, we heard this passage from the New Testament. You heard a gospel reading, I just read that from Mark, but before that are reading from first Corinthians and that's from the part of the New Testament, the part of the Bible that's about Jesus and the early church. And as you see this bickering come into the forefront, it's in the passage from chapter 6 verses 8 through 13 and we see Paul, who's this early leader in the church, there he is at his desk, you can see all his, it looks like me, sort of a pile of papers on his desk and he's holding a sword, that's a symbol of his ministry because he was the proclaimer of the Word of God and he says that the Word of God is like a double-edged sword that sort of splits matters very cleanly. But Paul, this early Christian leader, who planted lots of churches, clearly he was tired from the work you can see in the picture, he would travel around, he'd go to a place, start a church, get it going and then go to another place and do the same thing again and again. So a lot of the New Testament is actually correspondence, that's why the painter put all those letters on the desk in the picture because he was always writing letters, receiving letters, writing letters. And first Corinthians is a response to a letter that he got from a church in Corinth, a city in modern day Turkey, a big cosmopolitan, wealthy, Vegas-type city. And the church that he planted in Corinth had a lot of the things one might associate with a Vegas-type city and so they had all these kinds

of questions about ethics and morality and how do we Christians live and these folks were having an argument if you can believe it. Christians, I know, again, shocked. I want to tell you about the fight that they were having and I want to say what we can learn from Paul's response to their fight because it's sort of a surprising, I think, response because he doesn't do what human beings normally do when there are two sides. I don't know if you've ever been in an argument where there's two sides. Have you ever lived in a country where there are two sides? I don't know.

So Paul's going to talk about that and I'm going to say some things about what I think that might mean for us in the year of our Lord 2024. So the fight, it's about idols. It's about food sacrificed to idols. And when we hear idols, we might think of that. Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, this famous opening scene. And maybe when you heard this passage read and you heard the readers say food sacrifice to idols, I bet a lot of you are like thank you. We've been having this conversation at my dinner table and we are so glad that the Bible addresses it because you think idols and it's like what does that have to do with us today? But in the ancient world, all meat was sacrificed to an idol, almost always, occasionally maybe not. But in general, if you went to a place to buy meat and it was a Gentile meat market, it would have been sacrificed to Zeus or Aphrodite or somebody would have maybe all the gods were involved in this. And so food was sacrificed to idols. In the Jewish tradition as well, food was sacrificed to the temple all the time. And of course, unless it was a whole burnt offering, maybe it was just a partial offering. The meat would be saved and distributed to the priests and maybe some to the people. And that was sacrificed not to an idol, but to the one true god. But you would never just kill an animal to nothing. It was always sacrificed to something. And you would gather in Gentile temples, if you were a Gentile, you would go and you would have meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. And so if you were invited to one of those gatherings or invited to somebody's house and so this early Christian community is a mix of people who had grown up in the Jewish traditions, the people of Israel and the people who had not, the people who grew

up with

Zeus and Hera and Hades and Iron Man and Black Widow and that whole pantheon of deities.

And so this was a real controversy because the folks as Paul says was this mix. It was a blue state, red state kind of situation. We eat food, sacrifice to idols and we don't. And so as they write in this text, they say the people who are writing Paul, they say we have knowledge. We know that idols aren't anything. There is only one god. And so anything sacrificed to an idol is like sacrificing something to something that doesn't exist. So there's nothing wrong. And we know from Peter's conversation, you can read about in the book of Acts, he has a vision from the Lord and Lord says you can eat anything now. All foods are clean. So there are no more restrictions about what you can eat. And for the Christians, Gentiles and Jews coming together, there are no restrictions about what one can eat. And yet there was still division because the people who had come from the Jewish tradition could point to the scripture and say the word of god says no idols. We can't touch it. I have not eaten this my entire life and I never will.

And then the Gentiles were saying yes, my weak brothers and sisters, we who are strong and have pure knowledge know, except they couldn't quote the Bible because it wasn't written yet. Well, Old Testament, yes, but not the New Testament. It wasn't there yet. This was all oral history and stories. So the people over here could say well, the Bible says, the people over here says we, however, think we have an opinion. There's some stories and we know that we can eat food, sacrifice to idols. So there's an argument about scriptures as an argument about what we can do and not do. Paul begins by saying yes, you have this knowledge, but knowledge puffs up.

Knowledge can make you arrogant and look down on those who don't fully understand or are as enlightened as you are. He says love, however, builds up. And this gives you a sense of where Paul is going.

It's not about settling a question of knowledge who knows the right thing and the wrong thing, who wins and who loses, but about what does love look like in a community where people disagree because it's been like this from the beginning in every Christian community. If you ever find a Christian community or any religious community or any community where

everybody agrees on everything,  
you have found a cult. And you should run away.  
Paul says in verse 4, you are right as the eating of food offered to  
idols. No,  
idol in the world really exists. He quotes their letter to him back to  
them. You're right.  
But he goes on to say in verse 6, yet for us there is one God, one  
Father, for whom all things are  
and for whom we exist and one Lord Jesus Christ, for whom all things  
and through whom we exist.  
So basically he's saying he's going even more. Yes, not only are you  
right,  
everything is the Lord, everything exists through Christ. So this  
whole thing about idols,  
we know it's not an issue. But Paul's concern is that if the people  
who come from a tradition  
where one does not eat food sacrifice to idols and they see people in  
their community eating food  
sacrifice to idols, it still, you know, kind of hits them funny and  
makes their conscience hurt  
a little bit. And it's a little bit like when D. L. Moody, the famous  
evangelist and preacher met  
C. S. Lewis and you went to England and met Jack Lewis and came back  
and they said, what was he  
like? He said, well, he smokes any drinks, but I do believe he's a  
Christian.  
You know, D. L. Moody, his conscience couldn't really handle. It was  
such a disconnect for him to see  
this author of mere Christianity lighting up and having a cocktail at  
the end of the day.  
It hurt his conscience. And many people in the Christian community  
then would see people  
eating this meat sacrifice to idols and they couldn't quite handle it.  
And so what Paul says in  
verse 9, he says, take care that there's liberty of yours. You do have  
Christian freedom, but  
take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a  
stumbling block to the weak. He says,  
these people, they're not your enemy, they're people for whom Christ  
died, even if you don't agree  
with them. Now, I don't like this. I want to fight for my right to be  
right. I mean, I'm right.  
I wouldn't hold a position if it was wrong. I only hold correct  
positions. The only problem  
is everybody thinks they only hold correct positions. And Paul does  
this really interesting thing  
because he also, for a lot of his life, held what he thought were the  
correct positions. And some  
of his attitude about this, I think, comes from his experience. He was  
trying to wipe out the early

church. He was trying to kill or have all Christians arrested to stamp out the message of Jesus of Nazareth because Jesus was saying, whether you come from a pure Israel background or you're Samaritan, it's fine. Everybody's welcome. Maybe if you're a centurion, that's fine too. I'll heal your servant. You don't have to be someone who is regular in synagogue attendance. That's fine. And so people were not into this, but Paul, as he was trying to kill the early church, Jesus appeared to him and called him and said, you're wrong, but I love you. And now you're on my team. And now you're going to be preaching the message that you tried to destroy. So this guy, Paul basically has a nervous breakdown. Everything he thought was right before turns out was wrong or misunderstood. And he re-thinks everything. So Paul has now been someone who thought he was right and realizes he was horribly wrong. He thought he was right for God. He thought God was on his side and turns out God wasn't, but yet God was. Because Paul gets recruited. So Paul's perspective is, well, it is important what we believe. And there are things that are right and things that are wrong. And Paul makes very clear, yes, you people who eat meat sacrifice titles, you are correct that all things are clean and all things are permissible now for you to eat because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Yes, you are right, but there is something more important than being right. And that thing is love. And Jesus died for you and for them. And you keep calling them weak, but that means you have misunderstood who they are. You know, this, he talks about people being weak and those who are weak in their faith. And he's using, again, the terms they would have used with him. He's kind of quoting them back to them. You think these people are weak, but let room remind you before you dehumanize another, which is always what happens when you call a whole group of people by a thing, those weak people. Now, we usually might say those people, whenever you hear those people, those words come out of your mouth, I want you to just do this to yourself. Spiritually, not literally, but that means you've just put a whole category of people and dehumanize them. So Paul seems to think that love is the most important thing in a community where people disagree. And he tells the people who are right. He says, I would never eat meat,

even though I know I'm right, if it would hurt the conscience of somebody for whom Christ died. It's not this my way or the highway. Winner takes all because I'm right. I don't care what other people think. I actually care more for them than I do for my rights. Now, this is not something that we're used to. We're not used to this kind of compromise and caring for people who are wrong, who disagree with us. But that's what Paul says is the main thing. I don't know if you are aware, so apologies if this is a spoiler, but we're in an election year. My heart rate just went up. I'm expiring. We're nervous. It's going to be a big one and a difficult one. And if I could say one thing right now, it's to remember that Christians do disagree and Christ died for all of us. And whatever you do, have your intellectual and political debates. Have your friendly rivalries. Have your substantive, passionate conversations about the issues that are in front of us. And there are real differences and really big questions. But don't forget that the person with whom you disagree is someone made in God's image. And there's a story about why they are who they are. We don't have to change their mind. You don't have to change your mind. But don't forget that fact. I've been watching the chosen recently. People have been telling about the show for years. It's now in its fourth season. And I'm not usually one for religious TV. It's usually both bad art and bad theology. So I tend to stay away. But I got to tell you this is done really beautifully and really well. It's not perfect. But it is remarkable because it does, I think, capture this essence of who Christ is in the New Testament. That is, he's someone who loves everybody. He's healing everyone. He's forgiving everyone. The disciples hate it. The religious leaders in his own community hate it. But he is the one, as we heard from that reading in Mark 1 today. Jesus is the one who speaks with authority. And the authoritative word that he speaks, what he says to you and to me is that you are forgiven. You're valuable to God. You are loved by God. And you may not be right about all things. In fact, you're not. There's a humility that he invites you to. But that humility comes from being someone who likes Saint Paul was called by Christ despite your wrongness and your sin and your deceptions and all the things in your life that were kind of

bent and broken and maybe  
still are. You were called into service and into this community. This  
thing called the church.  
So it's not us and them. It's not those people versus my views. It's  
us people beloved by God.  
And this is what Bono says if you need another source in one of the  
more recent YouTube albums.  
There's no us. There's no them. It's just we. We're deemed by Christ,  
set free. All works in progress.  
So my invitation and the grace that has been shown you, what would it  
be like if we were the  
kind of community that like Paul said it's not most important to  
determine who's right and who's  
wrong instead to build up each other in love because that is what God  
has done for us.  
I await your tweets. Let us pray. Almighty God, help us to have the  
same attitude of  
Saint Paul as someone who was wrong and yet forgiven that we might  
display grace and charity to  
those with whom we disagree knowing that we are all made in your image  
and loved by you.  
It's hard and we don't like it but help us. We pray in Christ's name.  
Amen.