



“Our Brothers’ Keepers”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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January 29, 2012

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

One way to describe the Apostle Paul’s vocation...his calling...his mission...is that he was a...Christian church planter...a prolific one. He traveled around the Middle East...and Asia Minor...starting churches.

Now...Paul was a man of enormous passion...and loyalty. And so when it came time for him...to leave one of his churches...to move on to another city...I imagine him as being hugely conflicted: very very sad...but also...excited about his mission to start a new church.

Throughout his letters...it’s so clear...that he deeply loved his churches...and that he missed them terribly after he moved on.

But when he left...he was able to stay in touch. He had friends who would give him reports. And he would send back letters...with all kinds of messages.

He would sometimes exhort them to hold up under the strain...often of persecution. He would sometimes lay out theological arguments. He would sometimes delve into practical questions they were having.

But the one thing he did in all of his letters...was express his love...first of course for Christ...but also for each and every member.

But...the church in Corinth...this church must have greatly tested his love...and certainly caused him great worry. Things did not go well after he left.

Maybe it had something to do with the city of Corinth itself.

As an important port city...it was an international place. Corinth was hyper competitive...a “dog eat dog” kind of place.

It was also...a raucous...bawdy...place. A place where there was huge economic opportunity...and plenty of opportunity to get into trouble.

The more raucous side of the city...is pretty well captured...by the fact that Plato apparently generically called prostitutes... “Corinthian girls.”

Whatever the causes...the reports were disturbing. For starters, he was hearing that the Corinthian church was becoming divided...into factions and cliques...with elitism becoming a serious problem...members looking down on other members.

And there was a whole range of issues to be dealt with...for example:

questions about sexual morality...

a problem with drunkenness during communion...

a problem of lack of sharing during communion...

and even an issue as to how men and women were to wear their hair.

And then there is the question Paul is addressing in today's reading...which at first...seems mundane...and almost tedious...and maybe not so relevant to us.

He is responding to a question...about a very practical issue...specific to the day: whether Christians should be allowed to eat meat...that was left over from sacrifices to pagan idols.

To put this into context...meat left-over from sacrifices...was commonly consumed in those days. It was difficult to avoid. It was part of the food supply.

And another note of context to keep in mind...is that Gentile Christian converts in a city like Corinth...were almost certainly previously enthusiastic participants in pagan sacrifice rituals.

Giving up such practices...would not be easy for them. It's easy to see how they might...slip back...into their old ways...into pagan worship.

One other thing for us to keep in mind...of course...is the fact that the Judeo-Christian tradition...was basically founded on its aggressive disagreement with pagan idol worship.

Nevertheless, it seems that there was a faction in the church...that was comfortable eating such meat. And this is who Paul is addressing in our passage.

And the funny thing about Paul's argument today...is that he starts out basically...agreeing with them...that eating this kind of meat...in theory...shouldn't be a problem.

Here's the logic: It's based on one of the 10 Commandments. We don't believe in idols. And if idols are nothing...who cares if meat was used in pagan worship?

In fact, Paul goes so far as to complement this faction...for having...religious knowledge...and confidence in their faith.

Paul sums up the point by saying: "Food will not bring us close to God. We are not worse off if we do not eat...and no better off if we do."

However...and as we know...Scripture is full of "however's"...this isn't where Paul's argument ends.

In a single sentence...he turns the table on these so-called strong and confident...believers. He warns them: "But...take care that...this liberty of yours...does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

You see...Paul is worried that the sort of "loose" behavior of these "confident" believers...might cause those the weaker believers...those who were more likely to fall back into pagan worship...to stumble...and move away from Christ...back into old habits.

The irony of today's reading...is that while it is about an obscure ancient topic...that might seem irrelevant to modern Christians...it turns out to be about something important to literally every Christian.

It's about life in the church...and how we are to treat each other.

Paul's view of behavior in the church...was simple: If the church wanted to change the world...it couldn't be like the world...it had to set an example.

And so...every word...throughout this letter...to a troubled...and divided church...is about how to heal the divides...that inevitably come with church life.

In today's reading...Paul is addressing an issue...that gets at the relationship between members...and their mutual responsibilities...to take care of each other...to be sensitive to each others' needs.

And yet...we can imagine those “confident” Christians saying...why should I...curtail my activities...put this constraint on my lifestyle...when there is nothing wrong with this behavior?

It’s one thing to talk about sharing...during communion. Of course I have to do that. But I have a logical defense for my behavior here.

Anyway...we’re all adults here. Aren’t we supposed to take responsibility for ourselves? **Am I...my brother’s keeper?**

Well...according to Paul’s words today...the answer to that last question...is apparently yes.

He counsels these “confident” and “knowledgeable” believers...to be sensitive to those who might not be as far along on their faith journey. His point: if they see you eating this kind of meat...it could cause them to falter...to slip back.

These more fragile believers...might have been recent converts...who just a few weeks ago...might have been participating in pagan sacrifice...and could easily be tempted...into old habits.

And so Paul is basically saying...**please...be careful with them.**

Let me read you what he says: “For if others see you...eating in the temple of an idol...might they not...since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?”

And then he lowers the boom.

“So by your knowledge...those weak believers for whom Christ died...are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your own family, and wound their conscience when it is weak...you sin against Christ.”

Yes...apparently...we are supposed to be...our brothers’ keepers...**especially when it comes...to supporting our brother’s faith...in Christ.**

I think humor is at its best...when it taps into a particular human tendency...and picks at it...in such a way...that not only makes us laugh...but also reminds...about who we are.

Now...I’d guess many of you might agree...that among the best humor we’ve heard in a long time...is from...the TV show...*Seinfeld*.

Jerry...in character...used to brag...that the show was about “nothing.”

But I think the show is an excellent example of humor...picking up on a central human trait...in this case...our tendency...to be self-centered...to think mostly about ourselves.

The series finale...in 1998...goes so far...as to put “self-centeredness”...on trial...literally.

Jerry...and his friends...are stuck in a small town...and they witness a crime. But instead of helping the victim...they ignore the victim...and even make fun of the victim.

Unfortunately for them...they are in the wrong town. They are arrested...on what is called...a “duty to rescue” violation.

And the rest of the show is about the trial...with its parade of witnesses...from past episodes...who have personally experienced...Jerry’s...and his friends’...selfishness.

And the finale ends...after their conviction...with them in jail together...picking at each other...getting on each other’s nerves. Kind of a comic version of the way hell is described in Sartre’s *No Exit*. **They are stuck with each other...**for a very long time.

And so...back to that question...Are we our brothers’ keepers? Apparently...*Seinfeld* agrees with Paul.

But for Paul this is serious business.

It's why...in this same letter...he introduces the idea of the Church as the Body of Christ.

And...if we think of the church as a single Body...it impacts everything we do....because...our actions always impact another part of the body.

An arm cannot pretend it doesn't care about the leg.

And even more importantly...whatever we do...to or for...our brothers and sisters...we are also doing to Christ.

Now...there is a question here...of freedom and liberty. One implication of Paul's point here...is that Christians have to sometimes put a limit on individual liberties...behaviors....out of consideration for others.

In an election year...we are going to hear a lot about our...unassailable...individual liberties...and freedoms....the foundation of our democracy.

But I don't see any evidence that Paul is trying to limit our liberties. Instead, I think he is trying to inform...how we use our liberties...and in the process...maybe we gain a new liberty...**liberty in Christ.**

Luther puts it this way: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

In the Christian Ethics course I took in seminary...we looked at behavioral ethics...from many different angles. But the course...repeatedly...was boiled down to a single point:

In making our decisions...**we have to take seriously the problems of everyone...who might be impacted.**

In other words...we can't ignore someone because they are on the margin. We can't write-off...other people's problems.

And so...this core...Christian ethic...says that we can't ignore the guy on the corner...as Seinfeld and his friends did. Otherwise we run afoul...of that "duty to rescue" law....which sounds a lot like the story of the Good Samaritan...and sounds a lot like Paul.

Another way to say this is...“Love our neighbor's as ourselves”. Ask ourselves...how we would react...if it was our brother...our wife...our parents...our children...

who were being mugged...

or who were hungry...

or who were lonely...

or who were...in the case...of the Corinthian church...members who's faith was fragile.

What Paul is talking about today...is the nature of Christian love...and how it is supposed to be lived out.

But unlike Seinfeld...and his friends...we aren't stuck with each other. We choose to be here.

And the same was true with the members of the church in Corinth. They could choose the ways of the world around them...or they could choose...the way...that that Paul was teaching them.

As Christians...we choose to be here for many different reasons.

We may be eager to get a new perspective on life.

We may long for the church experience we had as children.

Or to introduce our own kids to Christ.

We may be looking to help others.

We may be having a crisis.

There are so many reasons. But if we are hearing Paul correctly today...maybe he would sum it all up...by saying that we are here...because we both: **need to love...and need to be loved.**

If everyone in the church...thinks of themselves...**as their brothers' and sisters' keepers**...we all get both. We get the love we need...and give the love...our brothers and sisters need.

This is the very peculiar nature of the church. This is the very peculiar nature...of Christian love. We give...and we get...what we need.

Let me close with...just a few of...Paul's definitive words on Christian love...from later...in this very same letter. You know them well: "If I speak in the tongues of men...or of angels, but do not have love...I am only a resounding gong...or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy...and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love...I am nothing."

Amen.