

February 1, 2015

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

15 He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. **16** He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. **17** You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." **18** But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today. **19** If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. **20** Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God.

Psalms 111

1 Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. **2** Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them. **3** Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever. **4** He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate. **5** He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever. **6** He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations. **7** The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. **8** They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness. **9** He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever-- holy and awesome is his name. **10** The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

1 Corinthians 8

1 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. **2** The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. **3** But the man who loves God is known by God. **4** So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. **5** For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), **6** yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. **7** But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. **8** But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. **9** Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. **10** For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? **11** So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. **12** When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. **13** Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

Mark 1:21-28

21 They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. **22** The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. **23** Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, **24** "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!" **25** "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" **26** The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. **27** The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." **28** News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

What feelings bubble up within you when you hear the word, “condescending.” For me, almost exclusively, condescension sounds like a bad word. A real bad one. “Don’t be so condescending! You’re not better than be.” In our day, the word condescend has come to mean something like being patronizing or showing feelings of superiority. And so when we think of someone condescending, it always seems like a bad thing.

A number of recent conversations with Clyde have gotten me looking at the Latin root forms and

Old English usage of words. Long ago, condescension meant something entirely different, or at least much more lovely. If you break down the word, *con* meant something like together and *descendere* meant something like together. In common usage, it meant to defer, to give way to someone else. To condescend meant to prefer someone else and their abilities, their preferences, their perspectives more than your own. How beautiful is that? Condescension, at one time, as a particular form of hospitality. Today's Scriptures open for us this kind of holy condescension.

In 1st Corinthians talks about whether it is right to eat meat sacrificed to idols, a problem many of us have faced as we peruse the pork chops and beef

roasts in Kroger's cold cases. You see, when someone made an animal offering to the Roman gods, only a small portion was kept for burning or used at the altar. The vast majority was left over and sold at market. People knew this because the butchers tended to hang out just outside of the temples. Go make your offering to Zeus and pick up some steaks as you leave to head home. This was a common practice in Greco-Roman culture, so Gentile – that word just means not-Jewish – Gentle converts continued to shop in the same areas because, well, it wasn't a big deal to them. They knew who God was, and more importantly they knew that God wasn't one of these silly idols. They also knew these were tasty baby back ribs, so what was the big deal?

Other Christians, many with a Jewish background, saw this as idolatry and accused their brothers and sisters of unfaithfulness. Some people feared that eating meat sacrificed to idols was a tacit admission, a subtle acknowledgment that these idols were, in fact, gods. What a mess.

Paul writes to the community at Corinth who dealt with this very issue and basically said two things. First, idols aren't real. We worship the one and only God. Any meat sacrificed to idols is just meat cut up in front of wood and metal and stone, so it's really just meat. Secondly, though, Paul says that this still bothers some believers who are not yet as well educated in the faith and this has become a huge distress for them. It's causing conflict and division,

things antithetical to God's work of unity and reconciliation. So what do we do?

The answer, for Paul, is holy condescension. He tells the church at Corinth to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to idols. Even though idols aren't gods, and no matter how tasty those wings happen to be, setting up obstacles that keep people from God just isn't worth the risk. We can defer, we can give way, and shop somewhere else, eat something not sacrificed to false gods.

Of course, this seems strange piece of advice for 21st century churches. The meat we eat isn't sacrificed to idols, at least not that we know of. But of course, Paul's advice isn't about the meat. Paul's appeal is about the development of a welcoming

community, a family that thinks of others rather than ourselves, a church that embraces people at all stages of life and finds a way to include all people across the spectrums of life. Paul wants to see healing within the church.

For us as a congregation, I think this hits at the heart of some of our transitions and new ministries. Think, for a minute, of pews as meat sacrificed to idols. Things that we as experienced Christians appreciate, especially for those of us with long histories in this community. But they're also things that prevent the development of new ministries and cut short opportunities for new people coming into contact with God. To be sure, pews aren't bad for life in the church. There's nothing wrong with pews, but

with a transition to this new space, we make it much easier for others to come into this space and find the comfort of Christian community. We make it much easier to host new ministries like we will this afternoon in order to help grow God's kingdom in the NRV. We remove obstacles and instead help to provide new points of access for the people with God. We can think about this decision to move to chairs in our worship space as refusing to eat meat sacrificed to idols, about refusing to leave up obstacles for others to become part of our community.

Or, think about worship styles as meat sacrificed to idols. What if the big words that we use, the complicated hymns, the linear space, the standing and sitting and standing again, the need for

appropriate quietness or polite behavior, what if this all gets in the way of other people getting in touch with God? This is what Across the Spectrum is all about. Removing barriers. Tearing down walls.

Refusing to eat meat sacrificed to idols and instead finding ways to be fed alongside sisters and brothers across the spectrums of life. After church, we're going to rearrange this space so that there are worship stations throughout the sanctuary. We're going to use a bulletin that has pictures. We're going to draw our prayers to God, to include not only our money but our sins in the offering to God, to hold the cross of Christ in our hands, to sing simple words and to move about the space as we are able and as the Spirit leads. We can think about Across the Spectrum

as refusing to eat meat sacrificed to idols, about refusing to allow our personal preferences and comforts to prevent others from engaging with God, about creating access points rather than hurdles so that all people might come to know Christ.

Now this can sound harsh, but hear again what Paul has to say. There's nothing wrong with meat sacrificed to idols. There's nothing wrong with pews, or with the liturgies in our worship books. Nothing wrong at all. But there's something right about changing our behavior in order to spread the Gospel. There's something right about choosing the preferences of others over our own comforts. There's something right about finding ways to connect with God that connect with people other than just us. That

is the kind of holy condescension Paul calls for in 1st Corinthians.

Changing our habits, not to mention choosing others over ourselves, takes dedication, takes determination, takes transformation from the inside out. Let's not pretend this is easy. But, it is also something that we see in the incarnation, that event of God becoming human. Because, you see, Jesus is the clearest act of holy condescension that we have to see.

In Christ, God defers to us. Rather than the requirements of the Law, in Christ God gives way to the Gospel. Rather than remain in heaven, God descends to life on earth. This doesn't make the Law bad or heaven unlivable. Instead, God chooses a

different way in order to widen the beloved community, to expand participation in God's kingdom. Why should we care about meat sacrificed to idols when there's an eternity to feast at the table of God?

Condescension in this way is not patronizing or indicative of superiority. Holy condescension is sacrificing something that's not only acceptable, but something that we love – our favorite meat vendors, pews, worship styles – in order to introduce others to Jesus, in order to create communities of inclusion and love. As Paul says, food doesn't bring us closer to God, and neither do particular styles of worship or particular types of furniture. Each is a conduit, an access point to help us connect with God. As the

Holy Spirit calls us, let us find ways to help this
become a place where new people can find access
to God. Rather than obstacles, let us construct
conduits to the Christ that we know and love. Amen.