

What We Have a Right to Do, But Shouldn't Do

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Corinthians 8: 1-13

Delivered on September 27, 2020

When I was a younger man, fresh out of college, I joined Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. If you know anything about Peachtree, it is a very large church, the largest in our denomination. I don't know how many people it has now, but back then it had something like 11,000 members. It had more members than students who are enrolled in some major universities. One thing I learned from being a member at Peachtree is that when you have a congregation that is that large, you find that there are people who go there for all kinds of reasons. At one end of the spectrum, there are those who go there for cynical self-interested reasons—and that is obvious to anyone with eyes, because some people practically stand at the entrance of the church handing out business cards. As far as they're concerned, I guess, in a church of eleven thousand people that's eleven thousand potential customers, eleven thousand potential clients and that's the only reason that they're there.

At the other end of the spectrum is a large group of people who have a mature faith and who have been going to that church for decades. After all, you don't get to have a church with 11,000 members without a substantial group of people who have been going to that church for a long time. Churches that large don't just magically fall out of the sky. And then there is a third group. This is that group of people who have noticed that there's something really special about this church and they have found themselves drawn to the gospel that the church proclaims, but they haven't been going for long enough to figure out what it's all about yet. Now, as a pastor, you of course want everyone in the church that you can possibly have, but I have to admit that it is this third group of people who are the ones that you are the most

excited about. These are the ones that get you out of bed in the morning. The cynical folks, the utterly cynical folks, well, you say it's better for them to be in church than not be there, but you're not sure they're really listening to anything you have to say. The solid, mature people, you want them in the church, too, but on the other hand, you don't really worry about them; you know that even if they end up leaving your church, they will be okay. They will end up somewhere else, and wherever they end up they will flourish. But this third group, the newcomers, these are the ones you are most excited about. They are the people you can reach.

In many ways, the church in Corinth that we are reading about in our New Testament lesson today reminds me of Peachtree. The church in Corinth was a successful church that the apostle Paul founded. I doubt that they had many of the cynical people that I talked about seeing at Peachtree, but I think it is clear from the letter of First Corinthians that they had these other two groups. They had a number of people whom I'll call the old timers, people who had been going a long time, but they also had newcomers, people who were like this third group who were brand new to the Christian faith. But these two different groups or factions if you will created a problem for the church as factions always do. The newcomers, you see, weren't like the old timers, the ones who'd been around for a while. They knew that there was something very attractive about being a follower of the Christ, but they didn't yet understand everything they said they believed. Some of them also held on to some of their old beliefs. And just what were those old beliefs? Well, Corinth was in Greece, and so while the newcomers believed in Jesus, I am guessing they also believed in some of those Greek gods that you read about in your mythology textbook back in high school—gods like Zeus, Apollo, Athena and Poseidon, and all those characters who hang out together on Mount Olympus. Did anyone tell them that

Christians don't believe in all these deities? Probably, but, as I'm sure you know, old habits die hard.

Well, one day trouble came to the First Christian Church of Corinth. An ugly fight broke out between the old timers and the newcomers. Out at the local Corinth deli shop, a sign went up about a sale on meat. There was meat being sold at a bargain price, because in the pagan culture of Corinth, nobody wanted it. It had come from lambs and sheep and goats which had been sacrificed on the altars at the temples of these Greek gods. It was meat that was for the Gods, it wasn't for people, and so no one who believed in these gods would buy it. But along come some of the old timers from the First Christian Church. They went to the deli and said we Christians don't believe in all these gods from these temples, so go ahead and cut up about two pounds of that half-priced lamb. Well, some of the newcomers saw this and they were shocked and offended, and it created quite an uproar.

I am guessing the newcomers said "How dare you old timers eat this meat that was sacrificed to the temple gods!" and I am guessing the old timers said "We have every right to eat this meat. We don't believe in these gods." Fortunately, someone in this church is level headed enough to say, "You know what, guys? Why don't we ask Paul whose right about this?" After all, Paul is the one who started this church, and Paul is an apostle, so he should have some wisdom about this matter."

So they took a vote, and they all agreed that whatever Paul said about this matter would be the final word. So they appoint somebody to whip out their I-phone and fire off an email to Paul, and that person says "Hey Paul, what do you say about eating meat that's been sacrificed to pagan idols? Are Christians allowed to eat this meat or not?" And then they wait and they

wait, and finally Paul's answer comes—and before they read his words they all call a congregational meeting with the old timers sitting on one side and the newcomers sitting on the other side. And as far as the old timers are concerned, the first part of what Paul says sounds just perfect. Paul writes “now concerning the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one.” Ha! These old timers say, we knew Paul would be on our side. Paul says there is only one God and all these gods you newcomers believe in don't exist. Take that, newcomers. But then they get to the second part of what Paul says. “But not everybody has this knowledge. So take heed that this liberty of yours not become a stumbling block to those who are weak. If eating meat offends my brother, then I will eat no meat while this world stands. ”

What Paul is saying to these old timers is “As Christians of course you have a right to eat this meat that's been sacrificed to idols, of course you have a right to buy this meat at half price and barbeque it, make sandwiches with it, do with it as you please. These pagan gods don't exist and so no, you aren't doing anything wrong, you have a right. But I could care less about your rights. What I want to know is how you're treating your neighbor. What I want to know is how much respect you think you're showing your neighbor by eating this meat in front of them. Because to be honest, I don't think you're showing them very much respect at all.”

An English professor told me one time that in order to appreciate the art of good writing, you not only have to know how to read what is being said but also how to read what's not being said. I think the same thing is true about the bible. The most important part of this story is not what is said in what we read, it is what isn't said. For you can imagine, can't you, what these old timers must have said about Paul after hearing these words. “Wow, all this time we

thought we knew Paul, we thought he was the kind of guy to stand up for Christ, to stand up for the one true God, but it turns out that Paul is weak. Paul is telling us to show respect to people's pagan beliefs. Paul is soft on paganism."

About ten years ago, a friend of mine, a dentist by the name of Phil, invited me to give the prayer at a dinner for an organization of his fellow dentists. This was not the first time I've been invited to pray before some non-religious organization, pastors are asked to pray at civic clubs and professional organizations all the time and before I got up to pray, what Phil said to me is something that is often said to me before I pray. He said, "Now, remember Rich this is an inner faith organization." That was Phil's subtle way of asking that I not offend Jews and Muslims who were present by praying in the name of Jesus Christ. So, I said "Okay" and then I proceeded to give an appropriate inner faith prayer. Now, because this was not my first time doing this, I wouldn't have remembered this event at all, if it weren't for the fact that afterward a couple from Indonesia came up to me and said "We are Muslims and we want to thank you for including us in your prayer." Now, I mention this story, because I know people, other pastors, who if they were asked to pray such an inner faith prayer like that would say "No way. No way, I wouldn't dare do such a thing. I have a right to pray in the name of Jesus, I believe in Jesus and I am not going to be soft on Islam, I am not going to be soft on Judaism, I am not going to be soft on religions that I think are wrong." And after hearing that I've done such a thing, they might even turn to me and say "Do you think there's something wrong with praying in the name of Jesus, Rich? Are you ashamed to stand up for Jesus, Rich?" No. Of course not. Standing up for your faith is important. I often talk about Martin Luther King from the pulpit as you know, and Martin Luther King was undoubtedly someone who stood up for Christ even when it cost him

his own life, and so have many other people that I admire deeply. When your brother is being abused, or neglected or their dignity is being taken away, that is a time to stand up for Christ. But as I've said before from this pulpit, Christians don't just stand up. They also sit down. They sit down so they can understand their fellow human being, so they can listen to their fellow human being, and if we stop doing that as a church, then we don't have any hope of ever reaching anyone else. We might as well close up shop because the only people we'll ever be talking to is ourselves—and that is what Paul is saying to these old timer Christians in the Corinthian church. He is saying "It doesn't matter if you're right. It doesn't matter if you are right and your neighbor is wrong. Forget all that. If you are going to act in such a way that shows that you don't care about your neighbor, if you are going to act in such a way that disrespects their faith journey, then you can watch your neighbors walk right back to those pagan temples that they came out of." You know, the Muslim couple that thanked me for my prayer, I am not saying that my prayer changed anything for them. I don't know that I won them over to the gospel. I am not saying that. But what I am saying is that if there is ever going to be a chance of having a real conversation, if there is ever going to be a chance of having a real dialogue with them, it starts with listening. And listening not just to them, but listening to all those who are on the outside of the church looking in. And how do I know that? I know that because I too went through a period of years in my own life when I was on the outside looking in, and someone listened to me. In those days someone listened to what I had to say.

Standing up for your faith is not something I take lightly. There is a time and place for standing up for your faith and when we fail in those moments we become cowards. And a coward is never a good thing to be. But don't confuse a coward with someone who knows that

there is also a time and a place for sitting down, a time and a place for listening, and a time and a place for showing respect to those who are at a place in their journey that is not the same place they are in.