

“Dogma Eat Dogma World”

I Corinthians 8:1-13

One of my favorite cartoons is penned by Doug Marlette. It's called “Kudzu.” The main character is a preacher named Rev. Will B. Dunn. Kudzu is his sidekick. In one cartoon the conversation goes something like this: “Why do the Protestants hate the Catholics and the Catholics hate the Protestants? Why do liberals hate the conservatives and conservatives hate the liberals?” Kudzu asks. Rev. Will B. Dunn thinks about this for a moment and says, “It's a dogma eat dogma world!”

In today's Pauline Epistle Paul is playing “Dear Abby.” Someone in the church in “Corinth has written to him about a controversy that is tearing the church apart. – There's something sadly reassuring in knowing that since the very beginning of the Christian church people have been people. Like us they have found things to fight about and get mad about. I bet some found things that caused them to throw up their hands and switch churches, or start new churches, or even drop out of their new found religion! Yes, sadly church fights and church controversies are nothing new.

Until the kingdom of God arrives in its fullness I suspect it shall always be so. If it is not a fight over whether you can eat food that has been sacrificed to idols, as it is in First Corinthians, than it will be whether you can baptize infants or must wait till people become adults; whether baptism can be done by sprinkling or must be done by immersion; or whether communion should be every Sunday or once a quarter; whether you have to be a member in good standing to take communion; or whether the Bible should be treated in a “literal fashion” or must be “interpreted”; and I haven't even mentioned all the hot button topics like a woman's right to choose, same sex marriage, or the nature of the divinity of Christ! The

topics that spur controversy within the church come and go but controversy in one form or another is never very far away! Dear Abby, dear Paul, dear God, what can we do to begin to move beyond a dogma eat dogma world?

One of the first things we see in this passage is that Paul stresses what academics and theologians call “orthopraxy” over “orthodoxy.” Orthodoxy is “right belief.” Orthodoxy has to do with right doctrine, right theology, right ideas about God and faith. Those who stress orthodoxy stress creeds that tend to divide people into “believers” and “nonbelievers.”

Fundamentalists are fundamentalists because they stress certain fundamentals. Now it needs to be said right up front that liberal Christians can be every bit as doctrinaire as the most rabid right wing evangelical Christian. If the ultimate stress is placed on people having the “right ideas” about God than our relationship with people who disagree with us is likely to suffer. Orthodoxy seeks to find unity in unity of belief in the right essentials.

Birds of a feather do indeed tend to flock together. When I am in conversation with someone I have just met I tend to consciously or unconsciously begin to categorize them. Do they watch CNN or the Fox News Network? Do their bookshelves have authors like Spong, Crossan, and Brueggemann or do they have Dobson, Falwell and Robertson on the shelves? Do they love President Bush and what he is trying to do for the country or did they vote for Senator John Kerry? What bumper stickers are on their car? Do they have a NRA sticker or a Greenpeace sticker? Do they talk about what they heard on the Rush Limbaugh or the O’Reilly Factor or what they heard on the Charlie Rose Show and the Colbert Report? The list of distinguishing factors is endless isn’t it and we all do this don’t we? I am not necessarily calling for a total end to such exercises, as if such a thing

were possible, I'm simply calling for an awareness of the process and what it tends to do to the wider community.

Notice that Paul calls upon us, to in the name of love for neighbor, to temporarily set aside our personal "right beliefs" and the freedom that a "mature faith" brings. Again, Paul stresses orthopraxy over orthodoxy; he stresses love over right knowledge or belief, community over individual freedoms. He says, **"Knowledge puffs up but love builds up."** Now we need to be honest and acknowledge that Paul himself was not always able to carry this out in his dealings with opponents in the Christian community, but here he stresses loving, compassionate relationship with brothers and sisters that we disagree with over insisting on "right belief."

Interestingly, on this question of whether or not to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols Paul takes what I can only describe as a "liberal position." It is a position of openness and freedom. He says that for him personally he sees no problem with eating such meat, after all, he points out, there is no such thing as other gods, so how can the meat be tainted. It's good meat, so on is free eat it or not eat it? Paul views this as the mature position of a person with a strong, mature faith. Such a faith "frees" a person up to eat such meat. He says, **"We are not worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do."**

But Paul is sensitive enough to where others are to know that not everyone shares his "mature faith." Some in the Christian community are new to the Christian faith. Some have recently switched over from worshipping "idols" to Christianity. Some not too long ago sacrificed meat to idols and so intimately associate eating meat with this practice of worshipping other gods. "Their consciences are "weak" when it comes to eating such meat. Their faith has not fully matured to get over these

associations and so they seek the security of simply avoiding such meat on the basis of religious scruples.

A modern day example of this might be the disagreement that exists among Christian churches over alcoholic beverages. Many church denominations outlaw drinking alcoholic beverages. They set up religious taboos against this practice. Other denominations like our own, will even use wine for communion, let alone allow members to drink alcoholic beverages at home or in restaurants.

Sometimes people are amazed to learn that in my refrigerator one will usually find beer and wine. Sometimes they are horrified that a Christian minister would drink. I feel perfectly free to have a beer or a glass of wine, but they do not because of their religious scruples.

What should one do in such a situation? Paul says we should do nothing to “wound their consciences.” Paul says that he would forgo eating meat sacrificed to idols when he was in the presence of those who would be offended by this. Paul says he will curb his freedom out of love and concern for his “weaker” sisters and brothers in the faith.

If I know someone has problems with Christians drinking alcoholic beverages I will not stress the point that I feel perfectly free to do so. I certainly will not drink a beverage in front of such a person, if I know they hold such views. Now if I know the person well and I know that while they themselves hold to such scruples they recognize that others do not and need not, I’ll go ahead and have that beer. It very much depends on the situation and the people I am with.

Alright, maybe this can work with something like drinking or not drinking an alcoholic beverage, but what about dealing with the more controversial issues that bedevil the church today? What do we do with such

issues as abortion, the role of women in society and in the church, same sex unions, etc.? The goal of church is not just to “make nice” and sweep all disagreements under the rug. Do that long enough and you end up with a lot of lumpy rugs!

Paul fully recognizes that the church, by nature is a diverse body. It is made up off many people with many different talents, personalities, needs, issues, beliefs, theologies, philosophies, etc. That is the nature of what it means to be the church. Paul is saying that this need not be a weakness. It can indeed be a strength, if, and it is a big IF, people relate to one another in a respectful and loving way.

In *Texts for Preaching Year B* encourages us to **“Notice that in advising some members of the church to refrain from using their liberty as a ‘stumbling block to the weak’ (8:9), Paul’s effort is not to protect the weak from being offended, but from imitating the behavior of others to their own hurt.”** This is a very important point! It goes on to say **“Fear of offending others, unfortunately has often made some people tiptoe through life. They have catered to the whims of every moralists or legalist who raised a voice. They have kept silent in the face of injustices and enjoyed their freedom only in private. They have not wanted to cause offense. In doing so they have missed the point of First Corinthians.”**

Ideally, the Body of Christ should be the kind of place where people can discuss the important moral and spiritual issues of the day in a spirit of Christian love. There certainly are few places in society where this can happen, although I once heard someone make the case that the local coffee shop in a small town can sometimes carry this off. There you’ve known the people for years, if not decades. You know and put up with their

eccentricities and pet peeves because they put up with yours. You also put up with your fellow coffee drinkers because old Joe came over in the middle of the night and helped you put out your barn fire, or loaned you his harvester when yours broke down. You can let him blow off steam on whatever hot-button issue he needs to. Maybe, just maybe you listen to what old Joe has to say because you respect him and have known him for so long. Maybe, just maybe you listen enough to change your mind on a long held view that he, in a quiet way, helps you to see differently. Paul suggested that one of the primary goals of the church is to for all of us to listen and learn from one another, to help each other grow and mature in the faith.

The ultimate clincher for Paul is that we remember that Christ died for us ALL, for the people we agree with and for the people we disagree with, for the people we love as well as the people we tend to write off and despise.

I have to confess that when I see Rev. Jerry Falwell on the TV I feel like throwing something at it. I have the same reaction when Rev. Pat Robertson is on putting his foot in his mouth for the umpteenth time! Still, what a difference in attitude it can make if one remembers that Christ died for us all, not just some of us, not just for the people we agree with or who agree with us. Christ died for Jerry Falwell and he died for Pat Robertson and he died for Scott Martin and he died for all of you. It is a basic Christian belief that Christ died for all the people of the world, past, present and future. What a difference it would make if we kept this in mind.

Ultimately, the grace of the Eternal can cover all our sins. If we remember this we can be about God's work of lifting each other up instead of tearing each other down. It seems to me that any religion worth its salt needs to keep this in mind. Amen.