

“Taking One for the Team” **I Corinthians 8; Psalm 111**

I was about eleven or twelve years old on the Saturday morning my father asked me if I would like to drive to Maysville, Kentucky to visit some of his brothers and sisters. I readily accepted because like many families we spent far more time with my mother’s relatives than my father’s. I also wanted to go because there were stark differences between these two families. My mother grew up poor, but pious, in a minister’s manse. Our home resembled these norms and priorities. On the other hand, my father was raised in extreme poverty by a disabled World War I veteran and a mother valiantly struggling to feed a large family. Consequently, my father’s siblings were street wise urchins who raised themselves and learned how to survive.

So, on the way down my father said we would first stop and see his sister, Lucille. Now, I had only met Lucille a handful of times. The oldest of the family, she readily spoke her mind and seemed quite different from any of my mother’s brothers and sisters. But even I was caught off guard when we came to the outskirts of Maysville at about 10:00 a.m. and my dad pulled off the road into the parking lot of the Knotty Pine Bar and Grill.

“Come on,” he said, moving toward the entrance of this log building on a hill overlooking a cement factory. Tentatively entering this establishment, never having graced such a business, and knowing if my mother were with us I would surely not be afforded this opportunity, there behind the bar I spied Aunt Lucille, owner and operator. Dad and I sat down on stools at the bar, no one in the place except a dozing man in the corner who looked like he had been left over from the night before.

The first thing my Aunt Lucille said to my father was, “Lud, would you like a beer?”

“No, no, no thanks, Lucille,” he quickly replied.

And then looking at me she asked, “What about the boy?”

“No, no, not him either,” Dad immediately stated.

Now, this story remains with me because it was so radically separated from the world in which I lived. My family did not travel in circles where people partook of alcoholic beverages. No alcohol entered our house. I never saw my father take a drink and never heard him speak of alcohol in a positive manner. Now, he obviously did not grow up that way. And after my sister and I left home, he enjoyed a beer every now and then. So that means that sometime before I was born he decided he would forego something he enjoyed in order not to expose his children to it. He made a choice to deny himself for our good.

Now, in our scripture, Paul urges the Corinthians to make a similar decision for the good of their church. In the Greco-Roman world, the worship of pagan deities often included animal sacrifice. It was so common that slaughter houses were located next to temples. When an animal was sacrificed, parts of it were consumed by the altar fire. The remaining portions were given to the priests, sold at the local market, and often used by the worshipper for a banquet at the temple. Temples were also the restaurants of

antiquity. The worshipper would invite his friends and business associates to these banquets. Like dinners and golf outings today, these meals were important political and business opportunities. So, many of the Corinthians Christians were attending these events where food dedicated to a pagan god was being served.

Obviously, this upset some in the church who had renounced paganism, that their fellow Christians were dining in a temple on meat consecrated to an idol. Well, this created a firestorm in the Corinthian Church. And Paul is contacted to settle the dispute.

In this eighth chapter Paul cites the arguments of those partaking of the food dedicated to idols, and note in the passage those sentences are in quotation marks. For instance, they argue that as Christians we know the gods represented by these idols don't even exist. "There is only one God. And, food is just food. It is morally neutral. Whether or not we eat this meat has no bearing on our spiritual lives. So none of this really matters." Paul responds to this argument by saying, "Yes, you are absolutely correct. Participating in this event has no influence whatsoever on your spiritual life. But what about its effect on the spiritual lives of those it does bother?"

Paul notes how some weaker Christians, and weaker here means more scrupulous, not less; "these weaker Christians may see you dining at one of these banquets and think it is acceptable to do so. But when they do, they are tempted to return to paganism, and therefore are lost to the faith. Consequently, you are responsible for their backsliding." Paul admonishes the stronger Christians not to do anything that will cause others to stumble in their Christianity. Otherwise, for the sake of others, refrain from actions that may be perfectly legitimate, but can cause fellow Christians to lose their faith.

One Sunday morning a Presbyterian lad's mother insisted that he go through the line and tell the preacher he liked the sermon. So the youth said, "I liked your sermon — especially when it ended and we got up and sang."

Paul admonishes us that our words and actions must not only be true — but they should be helpful.

Paul's central point is that love is more important than knowledge. Love rules our liberty. For instance, going back to our opening. Is it morally wrong for an adult to drink a beer after cutting the grass? My father knew the answer to that question was "No." But, could his example harm the morality of his son? To that he answered "yes" and refrained from alcohol. Now, I'm not trying to make a statement about beverage choices but want you to see how the Apostle Paul shifts the spiritual question usually asked from, "Will this action harm me spiritually?" to a higher one: "How does this action effect others?" The Christian always asks not only: "What am I doing to me?" but, "What am I doing to other people?" As Christians, we base our choices not only on intellectual knowledge, but our love for our fellow Christians.

An example of this I believe relevant today is church attendance. American churches are exhibiting less and less attendance by their members. Even the most committed will often be in church less than half the time. We now have beach houses, mountain houses, soccer games, sporting events vying for that time slot. We describe these activities as family time, relaxation, or even enjoying God's creation. And, as

adults, maybe we think we can make that differentiation. But to our children aren't we really saying, we attend church when we have nothing better to do? And was your personal faith formed by your parents having you in the pew every Sunday?

Paul reminds us that what we do influences our fellow believers, especially the most impressionable who may not have the intellectual understanding we possess.

A clergyman died and, resplendent in clerical robe, was waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Just ahead of him was a guy dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Saint Peter asks this guy, "Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?" The guy replies, "I'm Joe Green, taxi-driver, of New York City." Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the taxi-driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff, and enter into the Kingdom." So the taxi-driver goes into Heaven with his robe and staff, and now the clergyman is at the first of the line. The preacher stands erect and, without being asked, proclaims, "I am Joseph Snow, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church for the last forty-three years." Saint Peter consults his list. Looking up, he says to the cleric, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." "Just a minute," says the clergyman. "That man was a taxi-driver, and you issued him a silken robe and golden staff, but I get wood and cotton. How can this be?" "Up here, we work by results," says Saint Peter. "While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed."

We should examine our actions, to see if they lead people to sleep or pray.

"Taking One For the Team"

The Apostle Paul reminds us that sometimes Christians take one for the team, acting in ways that we do not personally find necessary, but aid in the spiritual development of others.

This morning, as we seek to be examples for our children, our families, our co-workers, our community, do we think of how our actions influence others?

Does what we say and do open the door for other people to seek Christ?

How often do you and I "take one for the team?"

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