

I'm not sure if you have heard, but around 100 days from now our country is going to hold a Presidential election.

There was a time – before the rise of media – when Presidential elections provided a chance to debate the merits of different approaches to the challenges that faced our nation (and the world), as well as having a debate about what approach was the best method for governance.

Now, we tend to steel ourselves for Presidential elections as we conditioned to expect an onslaught of ads, anger, hyper-partisanship, and – sadly – violence.

In the church, it is not our job (and not my job) to tell you who to vote for in this or any election. Not only would that risk our 501c3 non-profit status, but it is presumptuous and somewhat arrogant for a church (or a preacher) to claim to be in a position to give that specific of advice for a decision that so personal.

On the other hand, we certainly hope that faith **shapes** our choices – about how we live and how we vote – because we hope the ways we try to follow Jesus leads us - not to withdraw from the world, but to engage it...and try to change it...so that it better reflects God's intention. Like it or not, people we elect to lead us and govern us have an impact on us and our neighbors...so how we vote is one way we live out our faith.

As your pastor, this is the fourth Presidential election season through which I have accompanied you. And I've learned some things along the way.

What is clearer to me than it has ever been this Presidential election season is that one of the most important things we might do as a church is to **prepare** our members for how to let our faith inform how to navigate the coming months – which will likely be noisy, difficult, and confusing...as the tone and tenor of what we read, and hear, and watch will become sharp and bitter and divisive.

**How we are** during season matters because of **who we are** – which is, quite simply, a community of faith that contains different political convictions that will lead some of us to vote in different ways than others. It's not that how we vote doesn't matter – or have implications. It does and it will. But when we come to this space to worship (whether you are

in this room or worshipping virtually), we make a **radical and counter-cultural claim**: that our identity as Christ’s disciples supersedes any other label that we wear.

This month and next I am going to preach with this claim in mind.

In September, some Scriptures of the Old Testament will guide our discussion. Starting today and into August, we are going to let the letters the Apostle Paul wrote to his churches inform our discussion.

As a refresher, after the four gospels, your Bible contains a series letters that Paul wrote. Paul was the convert to Christianity who took the show on the road and spread the good news of the gospel around the Mediterranean Sea – a part of the world that was, in Jesus’s time, quite diverse. Paul helped start – and, sometimes, re-direct, new churches that formed in the first two decades after Jesus’s resurrection. Each of these churches were made up of people who – just like us – came from different backgrounds, held different convictions, and yet were still called to live in community with one another.

Each of the next four Sundays we will take a look at part of what Paul wrote his churches to encourage – and sometimes admonish them – to learn how to let their identity as a community of faith guide their steps and their living.

Today, we are going to spend some time in a letter that Paul wrote to a church in a place called Corinth – a seaport city in Greece. The passage I will read gives advice for how to accommodate difference within community.

Before I read it – let’s pause to ask for God’s Spirit to be with us in hearing the Word – and to let the choir center us, too.

*Holy God – ground us, not in ourselves or in our opinions, but in the knowledge that we belong to you. So help us now listen for your voice as the Scripture is read – open us, by your Spirit, to let that word dwell in our hearts. We ask it in faith and through your son. Amen.*

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I am reading from 1 Corinthians 8. Paul is describing a way through a disagreement among those within his church. Listen with me for the word of God...

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists’, and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, 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? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

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There are a lot of issues that will get debated in the course of this year’s election – local issues, state issues, national issues...even global issues. I’m reasonably certain, however, that whether or not to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols is not a topic likely to come up from any candidate, party platform, or focus group.

On first glance – or first listen – this is one of those passages in the Bible that seems so utterly foreign to our experience. Bear with me while I geek out for a minute on a few, key points:

First: Ancient Corinth – like other port cities in the Middle East – was cosmopolitan and full of different religions...many of them with their own “god” or, even “gods.” The trick was, if you were monotheistic (someone who believes there is only one God) – like, say, if you were Jewish or Christian – then you wanted to make it clear that this was an important part of your identity. So you would never want to give an impression that you believed in any other God save your one, true God. And you certainly wouldn’t want to give any impression that you worshipped or were participating in any ritual that honored another “god” who wasn’t your own.

Second: Something else to know is that the church in Corinth to which Paul was writing was made up of some people who had been Christians for a while – who were more mature in their understanding of the faith and how to practice it...but the community was also made up of some people who were brand new to the faith and who were, quite frankly, still trying to figure it out.

Finally: Paul knew that if a Christian ate some of the meat that had been sacrificed to another religion’s “god” (which probably could be acquired at a bargain...kind of like the modern day equivalent of the “day of” sale price for meat at your local Harris Teeter), Paul knew if a Christian ate that meat it wouldn’t mean they were associating with another God. The members of his church in Corinth who were more mature in their faith knew this, too. But those newer in the faith – some of whom likely had been recently involved in other religions who had multiple “gods,” weren’t so sure about this practice of eating meat that had been sacrificed. To them, it felt like an accommodation...a betrayal of the commitment they had made to the one, true God. And so – like churches sometimes do – whether it is a disagreement about the color of the carpet in the sanctuary or the implementation over a new wedding policy – the church in Corinth had a disagreement and a fight among some of their members.

What I hope you can see is that it really doesn’t matter about the details of that disagreement – which, to be sure, sound archaic to our modern ears.

What matters is the **method** that Paul suggests for how to navigate through the disagreement...and what **virtue** Paul commends to the members of his congregation who were in conflict with one another. And I think what Paul suggests meets our moment well.

Being loving matters more than being right.  
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I love being right.  
I really, really do.

She's not here to protest or give me eyes from the balcony this morning, so I will share that sometimes when I am driving somewhere with my wife I decide to take a shortcut that is not where the blue line on Google maps tells us we are supposed to go. What usually happens in that moment is that my darling bride *implores* me not to go rouge because I will probably get lost and we will be late to the thing we are driving to...and then...most of the time...the shortcut works out and actually saves us a few minutes.

Ohhhh...I love being right.

I love it – now that I realize that I've been around long enough to know a thing or two – and I get into a conversation with someone who doesn't have the same experience or perspective and can't quite understand why we do things the way we do...and then – after I've explained it – comes to realize the wisdom in how things work.

Mmmhmm...I'm not proud to say it, but I love being right.

I love it – in election seasons like this one – when I see a bit on the news or read an article online – and some commentator or author articulates the very thing about a candidate that I think – whether it is something I agree with, or something that makes me uneasy. I'm a sucker for hearing my opinions confirmed in words of others.

And I love it when I sometimes read others' thoughts in an election season – and then engage in conversation with my friends...maybe some who have different opinions than me...and I

remember some of the points of the article that I read...and I can use them to buttress my argument so that its smarter and stronger.

It's quite gratifying, I can't lie.

But with the Apostle Paul's advice as background – when what matters is pursuing that feeling...of being right...and justified...and smug...and so sure...when that is what matters – then maybe we've missed the point.

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Paul's advice for his congregation wasn't to try to convince those who – were, after all – right, that they were somehow misguided. He wasn't asking them to ignore what they understood to be truth for the sake of getting along with the people in their congregation who saw things differently.

Paul's encouragement was aimed at how to hold the truth that some of the members of his church felt about a topic that was divisive...how to carry that truth...that conviction...in the context of a community that had chosen to abide together...how to – wrap – that conviction in love, instead of self-righteousness.

**In spite** of the truth that people felt – in spite of feeling that they were absolutely right – and justified in their opinion on the matter – were there ways to express that opinion that wouldn't feel like an attack on the other side?

**Even if** a member of the church *knew* that they were right – was there a path...not of least resistance or avoidance...but a path that would allow for those whose opinion differed to still share in fellowship and to experience the gift that comes with a family of faith?

I know how hard it can be to answer these questions in the affirmative.  
It's because being right is a powerful motivator!

I know we live in a world where it is simply easier to find communities where people think like us and look like us and vote like us.

“Living in Community: Accommodating Difference”

Rev. Pen Peery

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But that's not church.

At least not in the way it was conceived at the beginning.

If we truly believe that our identity in Christ matters more than any other label that we wear – then it shouldn't be a surprise that we sometimes have to make the difficult decision to choose love instead of winning the argument.

Doing that moves us beyond ourselves – and better enables us...together with siblings in Christ...to bear witness to the world about a different way to live.

May it be so with us.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.