

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Sermon Title: "Things Not Worth Doing" (A Journey through First Corinthians)(Pentecost 2017)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

June 4, 2017

{SLIDE 1} We talked about division in the Corinthian Church and we talked about the need to become servants to the world. Now the topic has changed in Chapter 8, which still has to do with division and servanthood. The issue that Paul needs to address is food. What food is okay to eat? We aren't talking about vegetarians versus carnivores, as Paul addressed that issue in Romans 14. We are talking about meat that is sacrificed to idols and gods.

{SLIDE 2} "Most meat sold in [the marketplace of Corinth] came from sacrificial animals that had been slaughtered at pagan temple ceremonies."¹ This wasn't a big deal for the citizens of Corinth, because they believed in many gods and worshipped each one in their unique ways. So any meat that was offered to a god would eventually find its way in the meat department of the local grocery store. People could buy it and make what they wanted from it.

However, the Corinthian Christians were called by

¹ Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 159.

God to live a different life. Paul preached that the people should reject the loose and fancy-free habits that the port city offered, which were contrary to God's will for all creation. So when it comes to buying meat sacrificed to another god, what do these Christians do? Did these pagan rituals taint the food in any way?² If it is tainted, would the meat then taint these Christians? Would they give in to the loose and fancy-free habits of the city? They do not want to offend God but they also do not want to starve.

{SLIDE 3} We might not think about the places from where our food comes – we might not want to know from where it comes. So this issue in Chapter 8 might not concern us too much. However, I once knew a man in PA who would never visit a restaurant that served alcohol. He could not give money to a place that could lead people astray by selling alcohol that has ruined people's lives and families altogether. He could hold on to that belief until he faced a huge problem: the supermarkets in PA started to sell alcohol. When the state government approved the sale of beer and wine in the stores, he would have to wrestle with buying food there. Should he or shouldn't he? Where does he now get his groceries?

² Ibid., cf. 159-160.

{SLIDE 4} We live in a land of gray areas. Not everything is as black and white as we want to see it. A better way to put it is: not everything is as well-defined as we want them to be. Many issues are complex, multifaceted. Arguments can be made for or against, and either side may sound convincing.

For example, when it comes to our faith, Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. There is no disputing that. We all must believe this in order to be Christians. Jesus died on a cross, rose from a grave, and ascended to the right hand of God. Again, no one could ever dispute these facts. But then there are the ways churches practice their faith. Baptists will baptize people who have already been baptized. It doesn't matter from which church you came and if you were baptized as a baby or an adult, if you seek membership in most Baptist churches they will re-baptize you. I personally disagree with such a practice, but this is how they feel about the sacrament. I came from the Roman Catholic Church and they pray to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some want to call her the Mother of God, and some believe she can answer prayers, especially through the Hail Mary prayer. I personally do not agree with such a practice, although I came from the Roman Catholic Church. However, this is how the Roman Catholic Church operates.

So we deal with these grey areas. They are not make-or-break decisions, they are not life-or-death choices. They sit in the gray area, and they can be picked up and discussed or not. Sometimes when they are picked up and discussed, they cause a lot of fuss. They cause people to build camps around themselves, and now the divisions have begun. More fuss is created than is desired.

{SLIDE 5} How do we usually create fusses? How do arguments start? Over the simple, silly stuff, right? Over this stupid little thing and that ridiculous other thing we should have never mentioned to begin with.

This is how an argument can start, for example between a husband and wife. The woman: "Did you take out the garbage this morning?" The man: "I thought you wanted me to take out the garbage after coming home from work." The woman: "No, I said that you should take out the garbage right now, before you left for work." The man: "But you never said before I go to work." The woman: "Yes, I did. That's what I meant." The man: "Well, that is not what you said. I thought it should be taking out today, like any time today." The woman: "No, the truck came by this morning. How are they supposed to pick up the garbage if it isn't on the curb?" The man: "I don't know. I don't know when they come by." The woman:

“Then you should have taken out the garbage this morning, like when I asked you to.” So on and so on.

We now have two people who hate each other over garbage, stuff they threw into a can and didn't want anymore. They want to argue over the minutia, the details of the conversation, that can never be recalled. It wasn't like a stenographer typed down every word they said. It isn't like they can go to the videotape and replay the actual scene. They fight over the small and even stupid things, while the “un-taken-out” garbage remains in the backyard or in the garage.

Too many times we fuss over the little things. We turn them into big things that do not need to become big. The saying goes, “We turn molehills into mountains.” The little things, the simple, silly things: we don't seem to learn anything from them. We just remain angry and quiet.

{SLIDE 6} Paul says something interesting in the middle of Chapter 8 (verse 8). He says, “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.”³ The issue for the Corinthian Christians in this chapter was food sacrificed to idols: does that food taint us and thus corrupt us so we cannot draw closer to God? Paul

³ 1 Corinthians 8:8.

says, “Food doesn’t bring us closer to God. This is not what our faith is based on. The Corinthians were no better off, faith-wise, eating sacrificed food or not, and they were no better off, relationship-wise with God, whether they plucked their own fruit or not. In other words, do not turn this into something it is not. God isn’t turning it into a big deal when it comes to faith in Jesus Christ. Eat the food or don’t eat the food. Do either one to the glory of God.

The question we should ask ourselves is: Does the thing I believe bring me closer to God? It is so essential to my faith that I need it so desperately to cling to God? If we truly ask ourselves this question, we might find the answer to be no. Most of the things we cling to and make bigger than they really are are not essential to our faith. We could keep them or leave them.

{SLIDE 7} Many years ago I chose not to go shopping on Black Friday, which is the crazy shopping time right after Thanksgiving. I chose not to add to the masses and put extra money in the wallets of the businesses, and I felt at the time a religious duty to do so. I felt God calling me and even all Christian to boycott Black Friday shopping. This was during the time my sister and brother-in-law came for Thanksgiving, and they wanted all of us to go shopping on Black Friday. I refused and gave my religious point

of view. It sounded convincing to me. It was not convincing to my brother-in-law, who is also a pastor. We had a bit of a discussion about my stance, how I felt it was God's duty we were carrying out. My brother-in-law felt no such duty placed on his shoulders. Although he understood, he did not feel compelled to follow me. They went shopping and we'all missed a chance to spend some time together, even in a crowded store.

At the time I felt it important to hold on to a certain belief/practice, but such a thing has lost its significance. I do not shop on Black Friday anymore not because it is essential to growing in faith but because I don't want to add to the chaos and anger that it already present in the stores. I don't do it because I believe it will draw me magically closer to God. Besides, if I do shop on that particular Friday, I will visit Amazon.com online.

So, if we feel strongly about a certain thing, we must ask, "Does it really help in the overall process of growing in faith?" We might not like the answer.

{SLIDE 8} Alongside that question, we should also ask, "Does what I want to practice help others grow in faith? Does what I am doing add anything to their relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit? Or, does what I do hinder another person in any way? Does it distract from God?"

I was listening to a podcast about an Indian Muslim who isn't very religious.⁴ In the Muslim religion you cannot eat pork, just like the Jews, but this particular nonbelieving Indian said that he will eat pork. Anyhow, he had a girlfriend at one time, and they went out to dinner with his parents. She didn't understand about the "pork thing," so she ordered a dish with pork in it, and his parents said nothing. He chose to take a bite of her dish, and that's when his mother had to say something about Muslims not eating pork. She wasn't overly upset about the situation, but she made her point. The next day, this Indian non-Muslim said, he and his girlfriend ran into his parents during lunch, and he happened to be eating a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich. Afterward he said he had to run off and do something, and so his girlfriend went walking in a park with his parents. Ten minutes later, his girlfriend texted him, saying that his parents were wondering why she is pressuring him into eating pork, when he should not.

This Indian man is not very religious. He is a 30-year-old man and says that he can eat whatever he feels like eating. However, he also understands his parents' position. He doesn't believe as they do, but he will not make them uncomfortable. So, he has

⁴ Fresh Air, Aziz Ansari on 'Master of none,' May 24, 2017.

come to the conclusion that he may hold on to his values, but he cannot rub those values in somebody else's face and hurting their feelings.

{SLIDE 9} This is what a non-Christian, nonbelieving, no-attachments-to-God person, has concluded. We live by a different standard. Does that which I want to do help others grow in faith? Does what I am doing add anything to their relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit? Or, does it distract from God?

Paul says, "When you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ."⁵ We may not view that thing as a sin, just a difference in opinion. But if it distracts from God, it is a sin. If it causes a person to stumble in faith, it is a sin. Right or wrong, it is not the thing we should do, if another person doesn't grow in faith but falls away through it.

"Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat..." Paul says. Just don't do it. It isn't worth it. Whether it is food or drink or politics or social issues or things we like to do or places we like to go, don't do it. If it frustrate somebody and causes them to think ill-willed thoughts, don't do it. Even if it isn't a downright sin by itself but sits in that gray,

⁵ 1 Corinthians 8:12.

complicated area we talked about earlier, then simply do not do it. It isn't worth the headaches and heartaches. We hope to build each other up, not tear each other down. We hope to draw closer to God through Christ, not walk away entirely.

{SLIDE 10} We live in a land of gray areas. Many issues are complex, multifaceted. But even God lives in the gray areas. God speaks to us from all the complexities of life, and God is able to manage all the complexities. God wants to help us through. God wants to walk with us as we try to figure out life – God will show us how to live with people and love them with grace. God is calling us closer to him. God is calling us closer to each other. Those are good things. Those are exciting and joyful things. Those are worth holding onto for the whole of our lives.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News from Psalm 103: the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us. Friends, believe this news: we are forgiven - thanks be to God! Amen.