

Love Builds Up

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

Rev. Hannah Coe, Calvary Baptist Church Waco, Texas

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I remember when I learned to make paper snowflakes; it was probably in fifth or sixth grade. If paper snowflake-making were a winter Olympic sport, I am confident I could have medaled, especially in seventh grade when I got so miserably bored in social studies and art class. I made hundreds of paper snowflakes at my desk. I became interested in seeing how small I could make the snowflake while still making it beautiful. Could I make an intricate paper snowflake the size of a quarter? You bet I tried a hundred times.

But here's the thing about paper snowflakes. Once you have your circle, fold it, and then start cutting away your designs, you can only cut away so much paper before you cut a big hole in the snowflake or the snowflake falls apart in your hands. Creative license has its limitations when it comes to paper snowflakes.

In this correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul emphasized that freedom had its limitations in their community. Paul uses a phrase "all things are lawful," several times in 1 Corinthians, always in quotes. He's quoting the Corinthians directly. They used this phrase with him. It was probably a pithy saying or proverb used in the Corinthian church, something like us saying "God helps those who help themselves." Something that sounds like it's in the Bible, but it's not.

"All things are lawful for *me*.../ am free in Christ.../ am not under the law..." the Corinthians said as they debated one another. In his letters, Paul didn't so much refute this saying as he qualified it or refined it, a style of conversation and debate that would have been very familiar for the Corinthians.¹

"All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial.'" Paul begins today's section, "All things are lawful,' but not all things build up."

The main issue at hand in this part of the letter is eating meat sacrificed to idols. Can they do it or not? Some believed there was nothing wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols; idols are idols and meat sacrificed to them had no power. Besides, meat sold after its use in cultic rituals was cheaper in the market than the other kind of meat. Others believed under no circumstances was it okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols because it was unfaithful to Christ and cheapened the sacred, cultic meal shared by Christians: communion, a meal that did hold power for Christ-followers.

As with many issues, this could be debated up one side and down the other. In the end, Paul's practical instruction was that the Corinthians should not participate any longer in cultic meals aside from the Lord's Supper. He told them it was fine to buy meat that had been sacrificed to idols in the market and eat it at home and it was also fine to eat meat sacrificed to idols with unbelievers who invited them into their homes. But, if the Corinthian Christians found themselves dining with a person for whom eating meat sacrificed to idols would stunt

¹ J. Paul Sampley, "1 Corinthians," *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IX*, edited by Leander E. Keck (Abingdon Press: Nashville) 2015, 741.

their growth in Christ, or disadvantage someone coming to know Christ, then they should abstain from eating the meat.

In short, Paul told the Corinthians this was a sometimes “yes” and sometimes “no” sort of thing. What mattered more than the “thing” Paul said, was that they (in the Greek) “let no one seek the [thing] of one’s own, but the [thing] of the other.” Our translations say something like “Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” In other words, don’t be so consumed with doing your own thing that it becomes your only priority.

Doing the right thing loses its right-ness when it breaks down someone else, especially a person who has not come to know Christ. Paul challenged the Corinthians to examine if the way they were breaking down their beliefs and convictions around issues was building up their congregation? If it was building up unbelievers who might be seeking Christ? “All things are lawful, but not all things build up.”

This Tuesday, February 15th, is the anniversary of Susan B. Anthony’s birthday. Anthony joined forces with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to pioneer the women’s suffrage movement. Their opponents argued that women’s right to vote wasn’t right and that women should stick to organizing outside men’s realm of political power. But Stanton and Anthony believed firmly that women should have the right to vote and that anything less disadvantaged women and society.

The Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920, 14 years after Anthony’s death and 18 years after Stanton’s death. It took more than five decades after Stanton and Anthony’s deaths for women of color to secure the right to vote in the United States; women of color who were 18 years old in 1965 are only 75 years old today. Stanton and Anthony’s opponents said that voting was not really a source of power anyway, so why bother? The suffragists knew better and worked to right the wrong of women being denied the vote.

Sometimes we need prophets to help us understand that what we think is right may not be so right after all, particularly when it diminishes the personhood of someone else. Love does not diminish personhood. Love does not diminish one’s ability to achieve human purpose. As one commentator says, “Love will always secure that which is advantageous to the *other* and builds up the *others*.”² Susan B. Anthony is known to have said: “I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.”³

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that following Christ meant considering more than their own desires, needs, and advantages. Following Christ meant more than following the rules. Paul’s orientation was not a rules morality but a Christ morality, which are not always the same thing.

Paul does something really interesting in verses 29 and 30 of our passage today. He asks two questions and in doing so presents two hypothetical situations. These are questions he could imagine a Corinthian Christian asking along the lines of the argument he’s just made. One

² Ibid.

³ “Theologian’s Almanac for the Week of February 13, 2022,” SALT Project, accessed on February 10, 2022 from [Theologian's Almanac for Week of February 13, 2022 \(saltproject.org\)](https://saltproject.org).

hypothetical Paul raises is, “If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”

Put another way: “why should I be judged for doing what I’m supposed to do, which is faithfully discerning what God wants me to do and then doing so with gratitude and humility to God?”

The hypothetical Paul sets up for the Corinthians here, though not necessarily a situation they’ve asked about, but one Paul can see playing out is: how will each of you respond when you don’t see eye to eye on what is faithful before God? What will it look like then for you to work for the benefit of the person with whom you disagree and to disagree in such a way that the community and unbelievers continue to be built up in Christ?

Paul doesn’t answer this question. It’s more like his homework assignment for the Corinthians. He’s shared with them his own approach. He’s given them a few thoughts on a couple specific issues. Now it’s theirs to apply.

This is the work we’re still doing. Determining how to exist in thriving Christian community with those whose sincere convictions are different than our own. At what point do we determine that love is asking us to do something beyond what we’ve understood to be *right*? How do we move forward following the Spirit? What does it mean to be a community who secures benefits and advantages for those with whom I disagree?

A practice that’s become common in church is using what scholars refer to as the “lowest common denominator” ethic.⁴ Let’s only address, let’s only discuss, let’s only do that on which we can be nearly unanimous. But, none of Paul’s writings suggest that his churches functioned this way. In fact, the “lowest common denominator” ethic would quickly lead to a bland, stagnant, internally-focused community always cutting back, rather than doing what Paul encouraged churches to which was to dynamically grow in their expression of faith.⁵

This reminds me of those paper snowflakes. You can only cut away so much paper before you cut a big hole in the snowflake, before it loses its beauty and vitality, before the snowflake falls apart in your hands. Rule-keeping and maintaining systemic homeostasis have their limitations in the church.

Christ is something other than unanimity. Christ is something other than rule-keeping and keeping things the same. These things are important, but these things are not Christ. What was non-negotiable for Paul and must be for us is belonging to Christ. And the guideposts Paul gives us is that, when we are looking for Christ, it might be best to start by looking not for a yes or no answer, but for love. And looking for love starts not with keeping rules or protecting power or ideas. Looking for love starts with people.

When we find love in each other and in our friends and family and coworkers, the people in our everyday life, love does not stop with feelings—what makes us warm, comfy, cozy on the inside. Love does not stop at “what have we always known to be right or what have we always done?” No, Christ’s love calls us to do the never-ending work of discovering and securing that which is advantageous, not just to me, but to the other and to discover and secure not just what builds me up, but builds up everyone.

⁴ Sampley, 794.

⁵ Ibid.

Early in ministry, I attended the ordination of a female ministry colleague. The ordination included a meeting with church leaders who were invited to ask questions of the candidate. At the meeting, an older man, likely a deacon in the church, stood up and asked pejoratively, "Tell me how you respond to the instruction from 1 Timothy that women are not allowed to teach or have authority over men?"

My friend responded far more graciously than I could have in the moment. But it's stayed with me all these years. I wonder what it would have been like if this man instead said: *Tell me your story of God's calling on your life. I want to know and understand you. I was taught that women are not allowed to teach men and they cannot have authority over men in church, but I am wanting to learn a different way. How can I affirm, secure, and build up your call to teach and pastor people, including men, if this ever comes up in our church?*

Our lives are so full these days, but I am not sure the fullness, the buildup, happening within us and around us is love. What is needed is a buildup of love in our lives and in our world. What a privilege and an honor for the church to be that place. What a privilege and an honor to express love as did Christ, trying always to secure that which is advantageous, that which builds up, not just *me* or *us*, but the *other, everyone*. Let us listen, in the big and small things, for how love calls us to open our hearts and lives in new ways for the sake of the Gospel.