

A Creative Epiphany

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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Prayer: *O God, we are each created in your image, your own epiphanies rendered with divine love; we give thanks today for the gift of community, even while we are separated, and that we are called to seek to recognize your image in our neighbors. We give thanks for the prayers which have carried us to this time – for the grace extended to us when we didn't know what we didn't know, for opportunities to lead. Help us to support one another to do the work of discipleship, joyously, intentionally, creatively...*

At this point many of you have told me that you are tired of living in unprecedented times, I've heard several of you saying you are looking forward to living in "precedented" times again! Let's live with precedence! Let's do something with a precedent – just so we don't have to work so hard to do ordinary things. It is hard to re-think every aspect of our lives... all day, every day, and try to live with everyone else doing the same thing -- coming up with wrong -- I mean different, answers... exhausting.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said: "One aspect of creativity is to initiate novelty to match novel circumstances."

In worship we have been encouraging you in creativity this season – described by our new president, Joe Biden, as "the dark winter" of pandemic. You will need to find a place of safety for yourself, where you do not need to fear for your own well-being and claim your own creative energy.

A couple of weeks ago in cyber coffee hour we talked about what creative practices we may have going on at home. Some people resonated with the question right away, knowing they do creative things – painting, knitting, wood working, gardening, baking, and so forth. Others said what they did wasn't so creative, like writing computer code, or organizing, or working in finance...but actually, those are all examples of things done best when they are done with creativity and innovation. This is a good time to think about expanding our capacity for creativity.

God is creative and creativity is fully evident in each person of the trinity – the creator, the magnificence of creation, and the creativity of the Holy Spirit. It is one theological whole, three creative aspects or persons of God, in one creative Godhead. Creativity is only possible when we are not in our fight or flight brains, humans are not creative when we are sick or hungry or tired or feeling threatened. The Coronavirus is a very real threat to personal safety, so there has been good reason for people to be shut down as problem solvers and creative thinkers.

Yet at the same time a silver lining of this pandemic has been a flourishing of human creativity.

I'd like to paint a picture for you here of how Paul encourages the creativity of the early disciples in the Corinthian church, in a time when they really just wanted a clear simple rule, and then we'll deliberate on areas today that call for creativity rather than a simple solution.

Paul begins with his main point which is: lead with love. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up...anyone who loves God is known by God."¹ Paul is suggesting a creative alliance with God, not by your knowledge, but by your love of God. Lead with your heart, in other words.

The Corinthians are having a hard time living their lives as disciples because an everyday problem for them -- which none of you are living with -- is that they keep being invited out to community meals at these various temples to the Greek and Roman gods. All at the same time, it is idol worship, it is dinner, it is how business gets done, it is where they meet and enjoy community and their extended family. If you don't attend, you are really cutting yourself off from the world... which is okay for a while, but it isn't sustainable.

The other thing to know is that in people's homes in Corinth and the other Roman provinces, there usually wasn't any meat to eat at all. At home they made and prepared mostly vegetarian food and baked bread in communal ovens. When cattle for example were sacrificed in a Temple of any of the gods, the prayers are said at the beginning and then the meat is cooked on the altar and shared among the community. You could smell it cooking after it was sacrificed, and you could come to the Temple and partake. Everyone is expected to provide meat for these sacrifices, everyone is welcome to attend unless you are sick or injured or have a major life interruption.

Previously, in chapter 5:9 he has told them to "shun the worship of idols." Which hasn't gone over that well, not because they want to worship idols, but because they are part of the community and they miss their friends and family and business contacts. So Paul gives them another message reminding them that idols do not really exist, so they need to practice good judgment, judgment which needs to be informed by love. Love is the place he identifies as the ground of their creative answer to their dilemma. The food itself is inconsequential. Paul's concern is for those who may see them eating in these temples, and think they are worshipping an idol. So in other words, you can eat there, just make sure that your presence isn't a problem for someone else. He is really pushing them to find a creative solution in the moment; rather than live by his simple rule – don't go. You'll need to talk to those there, you'll need to engage with them, they'll need to know who you are, and you'll need to be sensitive.

Allow me to digress for a moment and say that Socrates himself was sentenced to death for this very reason 400 years earlier in Athens, which is 54 miles to the west of Corinth. Socrates was accused of "atheism" sometimes translated as "impiety" (among other charges) in his context, this meant that he had failed to provide animals for sacrifice and thus was not supporting the community well-being. A serious infraction under their law. He denied the charges during his trial, which he claimed were trumped up for ulterior motives, and his dying words are recorded

¹ 1 Corinthians 8:1

as directions to one of his servants to go and to sacrifice a chicken at the altar of a local god.² While he drank the hemlock cup.

For the Corinthians this was a real problem, with a long and significant history to it. Paul is pushing them past a simple solution to a creative solution, led by their hearts – their love of God and one another.

Probably the best modern corollary to the meat sacrificed to idols problem that the Corinthians faced; is the dilemma of whether to drink alcohol in the presence of someone you know to be an alcoholic. If you are answering this question with your heart, you will be paying attention to how your drinking will affect those you are with – whether you are participating in a convivial moment, or creating problems. Paul didn't think the food itself was important at all – what matters is the people you are with, and how they are faring in light of your actions.

Today we are called to find creative solutions to other problems. What effect does wearing a mask have on those around you? Are your decisions protecting them or endangering them?

One of our staff shared this week that a dear friend died of Covid19 this week, after catching it at a small Christmas gathering. Christmas gatherings are not inherently dangerous. It wasn't the food itself she ate, the gifts, the music...but there were real consequences to gathering in that manner.

It is ridiculous to think that gathering as we have done in the past is wrong. There is nothing wrong with it, like Paul said there are no idols, so don't worry about them. But there are consequences for those who are vulnerable. How will you care for them? It is not a time for a simplistic answer, but a time for a creative one.

You can leave a gift for someone, write a note, teach them to zoom or FaceTime, connect in an unexpected way. This is a time not to demonstrate your superior knowledge of Covid19 protocols, telling someone *how* they are getting it wrong, but to build one another up, with love.

It's a creative moment. Trust in the creative Holy Spirit of God to find its expression in your heart, in your words, in the work of your hands. And offer it up...

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²<https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/socrates-was-guilty-as-charged#:~:text=He%20was%20found%20guilty%20of,by%20descending%20into%20mob%20rule.>