



“Living Healthy”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 1, 2009
I Corinthians 8:1-13 (NRSV)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The epistle lesson for this fourth Sunday after Epiphany is a snapshot of the kind of ethical dilemmas that the Corinthians faced, and the ways in which their conflict management consultant, the Apostle Paul, attempted to help them resolve their issues.

In I Corinthians 8, Paul responds to the Corinthians’ question about whether to eat the meat of sacrificial animals. On first blush, this question seems bizarre to modern audiences, but there are some practical applications of Paul’s response that are not so farfetched for us. Stay tuned.

The Corinthians’ question was grounded in practical and theological concerns. Practically speaking, the meat readily available to most Corinthians came from animal sacrifices made to pagan gods at the Roman temples. Theologically speaking, even though the Corinthian Christians did not worship pagan gods, some were concerned that eating meat offered to idols compromised their salvation.

The Corinthians’ quandary deepened in that most members’ relatives and friends were pagan. Questions ensued about politeness and hospitality, e.g., what was a church member to do when invited to the home of a pagan relative and friend? Should one eat the food? If not, wouldn’t one be rude? If yes, wouldn’t one compromise his or her religion?

From Paul’s writings we learn that there were two competing views within the Corinthian church about how to respond to this dilemma. One view held that Christians should be vegetarians, while the other held that one should eat whatever was offered.

Paul promoted a third option. He explained that eating meat would not damage a person’s character or endanger anyone’s salvation, but he cautioned that meat eating could confuse weaker members and lead them and others away from Christ and away from the church. So, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to be vegetarians for religious identity reasons, rather than for theological reasons.

In short, Paul said living a vegetarian lifestyle helps Christians avoid *even the appearance* of being pagan and avoid confusing more vulnerable members about what belief and behavior is most appropriate to the Christian life.

MUSICAL MEDITATION “Open My Eyes, That I May See” (v. 2)¹ Scott

*O-pen my ears, that I may hear voic-es of truth thou
Send-est clear; and while the wave-notes fall on my ear,
Ev-ery-thing false will dis-ap-pear.
Si-lent-ly now I wait for thee, read-y, my God, thy will to see.
O-pen my ears, il-lumine me, Spir-it di-vine!*

SCRIPTURE READING

I Corinthians 8:1-13 “Paul responds to dietary questions”

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.

SERMON “Living Healthy”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

For a flash, I thought about titling today’s sermon, “The Virtues of Vegetarianism.” Liz McKay, one of our resident vegetarians, liked that idea a lot. But I chickened out, so to speak. I remembered that my Iowa relatives sometimes glance at our church website,

¹ Text and Tune: Clara H. Scott. Public domain.

and they might think that I'm promoting a vegetarian lifestyle, and drop me from the supper guest list the next time I'm home.

I'll never forget my first Christmas following my first semester in seminary, in Boston. Somewhat out of the blue, my Uncle LeRoy, who is not what you'd call a great conversationalist, asked me, "How do you like it out there on the East Coast? I heard they've got vegetarians out there. What are they like? What's the matter with those people that they don't eat meat?"

But seriously, I steered away from the vegetarian title because Paul actually had a larger purpose with Chapter 8 than promoting vegetarianism. Paul's purpose was to address conflicts in the Corinthian congregation, and to help church leaders bring these conflicts to a healthy resolution.

The conflicts in Corinth, at the time of Paul's writing, had to do with the following:

- Power struggles among rival groups jockeying for influence
- The prevalence of (and indifference to) immoral behavior among the members
- An erosion of good manners and general politeness in the community
- The marginalization of disadvantaged members by more prosperous members
- Questions about Paul's ecclesiastical authority

Aside from these challenges, things were going pretty well in Corinth.

By comparison with Paul's situation, I'm feeling pretty good about how things are going at Eden Church, how we handle conflict, and the types and amount of conflict that we incur—all of which seems in the range of "normal" and "healthy." So the lectionary's prompting today seems like as good a time as any to explore the topic of conflict in churches, how we account for it, and how we can engage our differences in healthy ways.

Waiting to talk about conflict in an organization until a situation is heated is a bit like getting a flu shot after you've come down with the flu. Conversely, being proactive and self-reflective about dealing with conflict, building healthy communication skills, and establishing transparent processes and patterns for dealing with differences at the lowest level are all strategies that help organizations learn and grow from conflicts, rather than being paralyzed or diminished by them.

II

Corinth makes an interesting case study in conflict management because it is distant from us in time and setting and yet we share a similar context and some similar issues with this ancient church.

Some of the challenges that the Corinthians faced and that we face are associated with each church's setting and makeup. Corinth was a city teeming with people from all over the known world, from all walks of life, and from varied socio-economic backgrounds. Ancient Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia (uh-kay' yuh). It was a large and prosperous urban center by first-century standards, and its identity was significantly shaped by its geographic location and place in the Roman economy.

Located on the isthmus between mainland Greece and the Peloponnesus Islands, Corinth rose to prominence as a result of its seaports, which fostered a vibrant economy and growing population. Like modern San Francisco, Corinth became home to an increasingly diverse population (ethnically, religiously, and economically) due in large part to its role in international trade and travel.

The church in Corinth was in many respects a microcosm of the city in which it was situated. The congregation's ethnic and cultural diversity made it distinct from the other early Christian congregations. Corinth was also unique because of the economic diversity reflected within the membership. Some of the most influential leaders in the early church and some of the wealthiest and most politically influential figures in the secular world were members of this congregation. Yet, like most early congregations, the majority of its members were people of modest means.

The membership of Eden Church, like Corinth, is also diverse in terms of socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, our Conference Minister, the Rev. Dr. Mary Susan Gast, tells me that we are the most economically diverse congregation in the Northern California Conference, UCC.

Because the Corinthian church was a "magnet church"—much like Eden—meaning that the members homes were scattered throughout the city and region, rather than in a central location near the church—the congregation only gathered on Sundays. A typical Sunday in the early Corinthian church included worship, fellowship, and a common meal—somewhat like our "Souper Sundays" at Eden.

Of all the early first century churches referenced in the New Testament, Eden is probably most like the Corinthian church. We are a congregation blessed by our diversity, and constantly in transition because of where we are situated and the transience of the people who come and go from our location.

These qualities make for an interesting and vibrant ministry, and are also occasions for differences and sometimes disagreements. In short, we are a living organism that bears the signs of growth and change. I believe we cope better with change and conflict than

most. But there's always room for learning and growth, and we must be leery of resting on our laurels.

III

Last week I was fortunate to spend 24 hours with 12 colleagues who are the lead pastors of the largest UCC congregations on the West Coast. All of the congregations where my colleagues serve have larger memberships than Eden, but we had other factors in common such as staffing, large campuses, renovation projects, and endowments or foundations.

Our gathering was partly facilitated by Speed Lees, a well-respected, semi-retired church consultant and seminary professor who has made a living of trying to help churches deal more successfully with conflict.

I was intrigued by Speed's response to a question from a colleague who wanted to know what the most common church conflicts were about. Speed thought about the question for a moment, and then said that he had made his living primarily by helping congregations resolve disputes over inclusive language, Open and Affirming, and sanctuary remodels.

Specifically, he said that most of the inclusive language disputes were related to worship language and the selection of hymnals; that the ONA disputes were about whether or not to embrace the identity; and the sanctuary chancel remodels were mostly about the visual appearance and musical instruments that were or weren't the focal point of that sacred space.

I wasn't terribly surprised by Speed's response. I have, after all, spent my whole life in churches. And, I have to say that I am relieved that Eden Church isn't "just another statistic" in Speed Lee's consulting logbook.

IV

Although we've been blessed to avoid major misunderstandings around the hot topics Speed described, we are by no means free of conflict and those who have been around awhile know that we have had our moments around inclusive language, ONA, and building renovations. Here's a quick history of how, I think, we have generally kept the peace in recent years.

My predecessor, the Rev. Dr. Donald Gall, was a no-nonsense promoter of inclusive language, and he led the congregation through the decision to buy the *New Century Hymnal*. The new hymnal wasn't immediately popular with everyone, and many of us still resist the Christmas carol texts in the *NCH*. Still, for most of us, inclusive language has become the norm. The *New Century Hymnal* is our hymnal. And the rub isn't that the hymnal is too modern for most of us—it's that it's not modern enough for some, perhaps many.

To keep the peace over the years, we have made a few accommodations or compromises in terms of the retention of traditional language in worship, particularly with worship music. You may realize, for example, that we print some of the traditional Christmas carols in the Advent and Christmas Eve bulletins, and that we avoid a couple of the carols in the *NCH* that have been tortured by language changes.

Also, we keep striving to learn new music as a choir and congregation, and we look forward to welcoming a new music director in the not-too-distant future who can keep us learning and growing with more contemporary music styles, and fresh metaphors and language for God and human experience.

Another accommodation made on Don Gall's watch, which I have continued, is the use of a modern version of the Lord's Prayer, three Sundays out of four, and the use of the traditional Lord's Prayer, on communion Sundays, like today.

Controversy around the Open and Affirming identity has been settled in several stages. The first stage involved setting up a committee and process, the adoption of Eden's ONA statement (which is in the heading of your bulletin), and recognition of our identity by the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns on their national roster.² These shifts also occurred during Don's tenure.

The next stage in our ONA process had to do with exploring whether and how we might extend our open-door wedding policy to same-gender couples. I made a pastoral decision to preside at blessing and covenant ceremonies early in my ministry. The Cabinet entered into a discernment process and made a decision about four years ago to welcome same-gender couple ceremonies, under similar guidelines that we have welcomed opposite-gender couples since our founding. These practices are now part of the Eden Church Wedding Policies and are normative for us.

A growing edge for Eden in terms of our ONA identity may include discovering more ways to raise our profile in the community as an ONA church, offering a more intentional outreach to transgender persons, and strengthen our partnerships with other organizations that are in ministry with the LGBT communities.

We've talked about inclusive language and ONA. Let's reflect on our renovation experiences for a moment. Now that we are largely done renovating the campus for a while, I must say in hindsight that it is nothing less than a miracle that we have come through that seven-year experience largely unscathed by conflict. We certainly have had our differences of opinions on how much to spend on the project and how to cope with rapidly-rising construction costs, but were largely strengthened by the conversations and the intentional decision-making process that contributed to our final result.

² <http://www.uccoalition.org/programs/ona/who/list/#CA>

Hopefully, these experiences better situate us for the day when we one day face larger issues about the design of this room—issues that have to do with the restoration of the organ, whether and how much AV equipment to install, and how all of that relates to the replacement of the nave windows.

V

What's the secret to successful conflict resolution? Speed Lees says that there aren't easy answers to this question, and he readily acknowledges that as a career consultant he's only been able to help lessen conflict in 60-65 percent of the congregations he's worked with. In some cases, things got worse and some situations stayed about the same.

The "secret" to successful conflict resolutions, in general terms, according to Speed Lees and according to the Apostle Paul, has to do with an organization's ability to adopt **attitudes, processes, and practices** that build up the body of Christ, which is the church.

If a church's attitudes, processes, and practices build up the body, then conflict is usually abated and the congregation moves on in a positive direction. But if they don't, then things tend to devolve from there.

We would do well to learn from Speed, learn from Paul, and learn from our past experiences and carry these strengths into our future, as we face the challenges that are on our immediate horizon—some seen, some yet to be seen.

To be sure, the challenges that we face in the near term are not about whether to eat the meat of animals sacrificed to pagan idols, but some of our challenges do reflect the larger concerns that were at stake in Corinth including these:

- How do we faithfully share decision-making processes?
- What shape and form ought our worship take?
- How do we balance Christian hospitality with safety and other household rules?
- How will we continue to welcome and integrate new comers and leaders, while retaining and honoring persons who have carried the vision and embodied the mission for many years?
- How can Eden Church be good neighbors to our neighbors?
- And how do we continue to answer these questions faithfully as we live into our vision of being an increasingly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic church?

These are our some of the important questions before us as a community. The best way to answer them, in Paul's view, is to respond in the ways that are good—not just for me and my crowd—but for the whole church, and the whole people of God. If we face our differences with an eye to what builds up, what is healthy for all of us, then the chances good that God will be glorified, and the mission of Christ will be advanced. Amen.