

Liberty-Relinquishing Love – Niqui Reinhard

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

I tried for a long time to think of a story to introduce this sermon that perfectly illustrated the forfeiting of liberties for the sake of love. Of course, Jesus is a perfect example, but that's way too obvious. I continued mulling, but all the thoughts that entered my mind were not terribly exciting nor attention-grabbing stories. They were thoughts of the ways in which my parents, simply in virtue of being really great parents, have chosen twenty-two years and counting of liberties lost in order to love needy little creatures. Driving to the millions of athletic and musical events over the years. Mom letting me have all the best puzzle pieces. This was both when I was younger and just a couple days ago. Dad giving up the nachos or popcorn, which he had originally prepared for himself, but which looked really good to me. So, I don't have an exciting nor hilarious story for you to start off this morning, but perhaps something of the every-day-mundane is an appropriate way to begin discussing the often-thankless task of self-denying love.

Some of our passages this morning speak of things like knowledge, liberty and love. All great things. However, we need to understand a little more about their contextual meanings to properly order those ideals in our lives. We will look particularly at the Psalm and Epistle to see the interrelations between those concepts.

A helpful place to start is the reminder that "the only fruitful knowledge is that which leads to love." In Corinthians we read that, "Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him." That's why they say that a little knowledge is dangerous, for a little knowledge proudly claimed and exercised without discernment can be incredibly detrimental. In our Psalm, true knowledge is a phenomenon which proceeds from praise and obedience. Its palpable expression will be in the form of righteousness, grace and mercy.

In First Corinthians we have two definitions of knowledge at odds with one another. The Corinthian's version of religious knowledge puffs up and leads to rivalry in status and rank. On the other hand, Paul understood the definitive knowing as "God's knowing of us, which, if love for God is properly in place, will result in our being known, in our receiving God's love in a way that not only claims us for God but also engages us in love toward others." So true knowledge has twofold consistence: God's knowledge of us, in other words grace, and our own knowledge, which serves as navigational markers on the path to loving.

This multi-faceted knowledge, grounded in our relation to both God and others, inevitably leads to communally-relevant actions. As such it flies in the face of the modern privatization of

thoughts and moral choices. We know that our morality should be somewhat communal in that it would probably be a good idea to confess to an elder in the faith occasionally or at least have an accountability partner with whom we are relatively honest. But, we don't often think in terms of our actions causing others to stumble. If I am "mature" and knowledgeable enough to not be negatively influenced by our modern equivalent of eating meat sacrificed to idols, then I deserve the liberty to do so.

However, "where liberty and love cannot walk together in harmonious agreement, then liberty for the Christian must give way to love." This is a really difficult concept for us here. We live in a country where the voluntary giving-up of liberties would be considered an absurdity. Perhaps upon first reading, this challenge sounds accomplishable enough, but if we haven't yet attempted to live it out in any tangible sort of way, maybe we should reconsider the depth of what it poses. How far do we have to run with this? If cursing doesn't bother me but deeply offends my grandmother, does this mean I can't curse in front of her or that I have to restrict my vocabulary for all times? If my current body of theological ideas would have some question whether or not I still love Jesus do I continue to let all of my new-found-knowledge burst forth from my lips or do I speak the truth in love, which means more than saying harsh cold facts in a sweet voice?

Paul is all about the liberating knowledge we have in Jesus Christ. But, as my friends and I were reminded by a monk on our trip to St. Meinrad's, being truly free means being free to choose and not being dictated by the choice. If environment and stimuli influence you enough to dictate which route you will choose, then you aren't really choosing freely. We live with the illusion that we have a plethora of choices. Determining which of the thousands of songs on my iPod I currently am in the mood for seems like pretty free reign of choice, but if for all intents and purposes I cannot choose silence instead of any of them, for lack of discipline, then I've clearly been conditioned and my choices aren't freely chosen.

The kind of knowledge that points us in the way of inclusive love rather than exclusive pride means sharing grace with those whose shoes of the faith are still a bit big on them. After all, the shoes are rather large and we're all a bit clumsy at times. My friend Keana reminded me about grace at the Simple Room the other night. We were playing a speed spelling game and the beginning of the first round was manageable enough. We spelled words like computer and Keana and Miss Wilhite. Later on in the round she uped the ante and we did our best to fit each letter of boot, tunnel, and White Castle in before the buzzer went off. Fortunately for us, Keana was gracious and the times we were a bit too slow to beat the buzzer she said, "oh, that was my fault, you can have another chance." Then round two. Our challenge was to spell the words Niqui and Erica simultaneously. Jordan, Erica and I struggled to slur together some sounds that somewhat resembled those letters. The analogy only stretches so far though, because Keana's grace was somewhat selective. Despite announcing to us that we had each received A++++s, she told the other two that they were, as she put it de-qualified, and gave me a chance at level 100. I was relieved to find out that in this round I only had to spell my name, and then was awarded 1000 fake dollars.

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As I racked my brain for sermon illustrations, I realized that some of the relevant stories of my young life may have already been suppressed due to bitterness. The oldest sibling knows all about giving up liberties for “weaker,” not weaker though in this case, just younger, brothers and sisters. “Niqui, I’m not sure about this episode of Wishbone, there might be parts too scary for Maria.” “Niquita, should your impressionable little brother Jace, who has already broken an arm, be seeing you jump out of a tree like that?” “Niqui, you’re the oldest, set an example.” The oldest sibling’s got it rough, living up to all the expectations of the moral exemplar.

But this way of thinking is not the most conducive to Christian community. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know “a Spirit that prizes mutuality more than victory, communion more than satisfaction.” In our less selfish moments, it seems quite plain that the faith of a brother or sister in Christ should be placed above our individual freedoms. But it’s not always easy to be that considerate.

It’s difficult for me to write sermons in the wintertime. I need my hammock stretched out under a canopy of trees. But. That’s one of the things that’s so great about a community attempting to heed Paul’s exhortation about communal living. When I, the weaker sister, can’t find words of my own, other worshippers around me lift me up with prayers and encouragement.

Christian community is made possible when we remember that Christ died for each person. There should be no such thing as natural selection in Christian community because the weak should be uplifted, not stepped over, until they are no longer weak.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” We all desire to be knowledgeable, but we need enough knowledge to realize we don’t know much of anything. Rather than the pretentious religious knowledge addressed in our passage, we need God-revering knowledge, which humbles us and empowers us for love and service to God and neighbor.

So let us show grace and love to one another, being encouraging and uplifting, as evidence that we have been loved and been shown grace.