

“Independence and Interdependence based on I Corinthians 8:1-13
Preached by Rev. Jonathan New
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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These words from the Declaration of Independence moved Americans to rise up against the most powerful nation on earth, to fight and to die, and to win our freedom. Our way of life isn’t perfect but we cherish those basic rights protected by our Constitution: freedom of speech, the press, assembly, privacy, private property, and, of course, worship. We prize our individualism and it’s our individual rights that support it.

But sometimes — and especially in the midst of the run-up to Presidential elections— I wonder if we aren’t a bit preoccupied with rights. I’m reminded of the father who overheard his five-year-old daughter in the playroom saying, “You have the right to remain silent, anything you say may be held against you, you have the right to an attorney.” Peeking around the corner he expected to find a pretend police scene. Instead he saw a wedding arranged between a doll and bear and his youngster dressed as a minister finishing up with, “You may now kiss the bride.” We may take our rights — so crucial to a free society — a bit far, especially when we feel we’re entitled to exercise them at all times. For the result can be a clash between individualism and our ideal of community.

Paul spoke to this tension between individualism and community when he addressed a conflict in Corinth over the propriety of eating meat from animals sacrificed in pagan rites. It was common in Corinth at the time to eat meat from such animals. One Corinthian church faction argued that since it knew idols have no real existence they were free to eat the meat. While Paul agreed the “enlightened” Corinthians were within their rights, he would have them recognize that some people “still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol,” and these people, seeing the “enlightened” ones eating it, might be led to believe that idol worship is acceptable. He warned: “take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” Paul’s point was: When the exercise of a liberty or right is a stumbling block for others it is wrong.

The “enlightened” Corinthians ask, “What do I have a right to do?” Paul looks beyond the rights question to a more essential one: “What will be most helpful to others?” When Paul says, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” he criticizes those who would exercise their rights without consideration of others, and he points to agape — self-less love— as what builds up the community. For Paul, love is the ultimate criterion for behavior in community; it unites its members in mutual care, and therefore takes precedence over the exercise of individual rights. Indeed, it may even dictate their suspension, for he says, “If food is the cause of their falling I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

I’m reminded of an incident at Harvard several ago while I was working in the University’s public relations office. A white woman hung a Confederate flag in her dorm window out of pride for her southern heritage. Some African-Americans complained that they were offended by the flag’s associations with slavery and discrimination. The woman replied that her right to free speech entitled her to hang it there. So, her African-American neighbor

responded by hanging another symbol in her own window right next door — a swastika — to underscore the white woman's insensitivity. You can imagine how the Jewish students responded! Soon the African-American woman took down the swastika but the Confederate flag remained. With the campus in turmoil, Harvard president Derek Bok responded in a way Paul would have admired. In an open letter to the Harvard community he said the woman was protected under her first amendment right to free speech, but that she was, nonetheless, morally wrong.

Bok, like Paul, was asking people to consider the community before they exercised their rights. But Paul took it a step further: "When you do this you sin against members of your own family." He challenged us to look at ourselves not as individuals among others but as people in a family. The power of Paul's message — indeed of the gospel — is this belief that we're all related and that God seeks relatedness.

We often treat our freedoms as sacred cows. But when we think about others as family suspending our freedoms can take on another meaning. Take parenthood, for example, where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness don't have a chance! Life? Face it, parents don't have a life! Liberty? Slavery's more like it! Pursuit of happiness? As a parent, all the pursuing I feel like I've been doing is running after my kids. Suspension of my rights... you better believe it! There's no such thing as free speech in my house or in my car when somebody cuts me off. I can't say what I'd really like to say. I feel the injustice of having to curb my rights and liberties.

But this is my family I'm talking about. And though I chafe under the bit, I hold my tongue because I want to model good behavior. My goal as a parent is to help my kids avoid the world's stumbling blocks without adding any myself. Does it hurt me to have to suspend my rights? Yes, I feel constrained. But is it worth it? No question. That's what parents do, for the good of our families.

And isn't this what Paul's getting at? Rights we have, but we also have an obligation to consider the impact of our conduct on others, because they're part of our family. Almost all of our rights could be seen to be immoral if exercised in certain situations. For example, how many of us, if we thought about it, would serve alcohol in an alcoholic's presence? We have the right to do so. But talk about a stumbling block to others!

Our faith emphasizes the need for justice, and surely the protection of basic rights is fundamental to preserving liberty and justice for all. Indeed, we should be proud knowing that our own religious heritage is one that's helped safeguard basic rights and, therefore, human dignity. But our faith also requires mercy and compassion. Our independence is crucial, but when it's worshipped as an idol we may be led to an individualism that threatens community and all that binds us together. So, let us continue to work for justice and essential human rights but, at the same time, let us not forget the crucial balance that our faith can contribute to the pursuit of healthy life together: Holding in our hearts the profound truth that we're bound to one another as members of God's family, so that we may discover our true liberty in the freedom of living together in loving interdependence. And, where we may and when we can, modeling a balance of rights and compassionate care for others, nurturing it in our children, and demanding it of our leaders.