

***"Practical Faithfulness" First Corinthians 10:23-11:1***  
**Preached by Rev. Adriane Carr**  
**First Congregational Church (UCC), Burlington, VT**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT**  
**March 18, 2012**

This being St. Patrick's Day week end, I am required by genetic coding to slip a bit of Irish wit and humor into the sermon.

I believe that you have heard this mixed blessing before:

*May those that love us love us; and those that don't love us, may God turn their hearts; If he can't turn their hearts, may he turn their ankles, so we'll know them by their limping*

Here's a bit of practical advice:

*Firelight will not let you read fine stories, but it's warm, and you won't see the dust on the floor.*

*God is good, but never dance in a small boat.*

And finally this story made to keep a preacher's ego in check:

*Father Michael O'Connor tells of the Sunday after Mass when he was approached by one of his elderly parishioners. "Oh Father, says she, "you'll never know what your homily meant to me. It was just like water to a drowning man!"*

Thank you, I have it out of my system now. Those few little tidbits of humorous wisdom do lead into a reflection on the words of Paul. I often have internal arguments with Paul over the place of women and the place of slaves in his writings; and yet, there are times when Paul can be eminently practical.

The great melting pot that was the Christian community in the first century contained orthodox diaspora Jews who embraced Christ but saw him as totally within the boundaries of Judaism. That meant Christians who continued to worship in synagogues, keeping the holy days of Judaism and equally keeping the holiness laws as well as the commandments. But the mix also contained Gentiles who had been invited into full participation in the Christian fellowship without needing to convert first to Judaism or to follow the laws and customs of Jews. It was not an easy mix. When Paul began his ministry, he was challenged by the Apostolic leadership in Jerusalem who had come to Jesus as devout Jews and quite naturally and protectively sought to retain that theological understanding of who they were; Jewish followers of Christ.

Paul was compelled by his own call from Christ to reach out beyond Judaism and embrace Romans, Greeks, Egyptians and all the other cultures of the Empire. And so he did. Thus, for that early Christian community, the simple act of shopping for meat became a theological controversy. Because of their background and way of

life, all of the gentile converts took for granted that animals sacrificed before the Gods were butchered and sold in markets. Giving no thought to where the meat came from, householders throughout the Empire purchased the First Century version of a leg of lamb or London Broil for dinner. However, among the faithful were those who had qualms about eating meat that had been sacrificed to the gods. Arguments arose among the faithful. "What's the big deal," said some. "We don't believe in idols." Others argued that some Christians lived by a higher standard. "What will they say if we are seen to be eating sacrificed meat? They will be shocked and turn away from the faith and the Jewish Christians will be driven further away from the Gentiles by our disregard of the holiness code."

Into the fray came Paul with words of practical logic for all sides. "All things are lawful," he said. In other words, there is nothing wrong with dining on a piece of meat that has been sacrificed to a hunk of stone. 'We know that there is no divinity within or surrounding that stone,' he implied. 'Sacrifice is an empty gesture.' But he went on, "but not all things are beneficial." In other words, he taught that what might be perfectly right and fine for me may not be interpreted by another as harmless. So he suggested that the congregation 'Do what is right for you but be sensitive to others in your doing.'

This passage speaks to Congregationalists. Our theology is both individualistic and communal. Each of us has the right and the obligation to develop our own relationship with the Divine. No one can tell us that our belief, our understanding of God's word is wrong or misguided. And yet, we are a fellowship of believers who comingle our faithfulness in love and support for one another. As that familiar statement reminds us, God is still speaking to each of us personally and to all of us together in the community of faith. It is our personal and communal responsibility to listen and to respond.

Last Thursday those of us who attended the dinner and heard the panelists at the ONA presentation were deeply moved by their stories of inclusion or exclusion in their lives. One story, in particular, stays in my mind and heart. One of the speakers was born and raised in the South, and was a faithful member of the Southern Baptists. She grew up in the church community attending Church School, summer camps, youth activities and vacation bible school. She went on to attend a Baptist college and loved every part of her church life; except the description of abomination that she heard about homosexuality. Since the age of 8, she had been aware that she was different from others. Throughout her adolescence she prayed to be 'normal' while struggling with her personal reality. Toward the end of her college years, she quietly accepted her unique normal but was outed in a mean and public way, the school newspaper.

At the age of 20, she was disowned by her family, excommunicated from the church that she loved, and had to fight to stay in school to finish her degree. At the age of 20 she had no one to defend her and no further sense of a loving God to guide and hold her, easing her pain. Because at the age of 20, she had not lived long enough to understand that her denomination was not the sum total of Christianity she felt abandoned by God and all the people and institutions that represented God in her life. And so to this day, she has a visceral reaction to church people. Her church family inflicted such psychological hurt on her, that she still suffers from post

traumatic stress disorder. It took considerable courage for her to come into our church, sit on a panel and look out at all the church people in front of her while being reminded of the church people who condemned her for being herself. Religion died in her at the age of 20. She did say that later she understood why God did not answer her prayers to make her normal. She realized that God made her just as she was and loves her just as she is. It is not God; it is God's people who frighten her.

The pain in her voice lingers in my mind and heart. 20 years old, 50 years old, 70 years old, 90 years old; it doesn't really matter. We are all fragile at some level and need to be assured that we are loved and affirmed. And we need to remember that through words or actions, we are equally capable of bringing hurtful pain as well as loving support into our relationships.

Paul reminded the church in Corinth that the issue was not a hunk of meat. It was sensitivity to those who differed in small or significant ways from one another. All were free to be themselves in word and action and challenged to live their freedom without either condemning those whose way was different or causing pain to those others. As Paul challenged them, so his words continue to challenge us to be unique in our personal faithfulness and faithful in our openness to the uniqueness of others.

Paul reminded all the members of his congregation whose they were. In his letter, he quoted the opening words from Psalm 24 as I do now:

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
The world and those who live in it...*

This is God's world and we are all a part of the beauty. May we celebrate the uniqueness of each member and live in beauty with one another and with our God. Amen.