

Being the Church at Brentwood

Responsible Freedom

**Psalm 111 & 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
(Hymns – 480, 507, 722, 712)**

January 29, 2012

The truth of the Gospel is this:
In and through the work Jesus Christ,
the sovereign ruler of the universe
has set you free from the pain of separation from his Love
to be reconciled with that Love
and live as a blessing to his creation.

In God's eyes,
in God's heart and mind,
(and remember, we are talking here of the
sovereign ruler of the universe)
you are rich in all things needed to flourish,
filled with all the blessings needed,
to live as beloved friends of God
in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Those are some of the words
that Paul uses in his introduction
to this first letter written to the church in Corinth.
This is a cranky, contentious, conflicted bunch of Christians.
I've done a lot of work with congregations across Canada
involving conflict resolution
and I've never run across a congregation as deeply divided as this one.
Most church judicatories and authorities would give up
and shut the congregation down.

But Paul had a different vision for this struggling community
of those whom he had called into fellowship with him
through the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
He was deeply convinced that these people,
in spite of the earthiness of their spats and sins,
were truly treasures endowed by God
with the energy to be faithful, hopeful, and loving.
He was deeply convinced that these people
were nourished by the grace of Jesus Christ to flourish
as God's beloved friends.

This condition of positive flourishing,
this state of being filled with the energy of divine Love,
is a gift.

As a gift, it needs to be accepted,
to be received with deep and transforming gratitude,
to be incorporated into our whole being
so that it becomes the fire and passion from which we live our lives.

Here's one of the paradoxes of the Gospel –
one of those realities that puzzles the logic of the unredeemed human mind:
by freely and willingly subjecting ourselves
to the redeeming energy of the Divine Giver,
we are free to both enjoy the gift ourselves and give it away to others.
Indeed, our true enjoyment of freedom in God's Love
lies in giving it away with abandon and delight.
That's what we do when we live as a blessing
to everyone we meet and to the world which is our home.

John Calvin in one of the most influential thinkers
in the Presbyterian branch of the church universal.
One of my colleagues back in Ontario,
who serves with me on a national advisory committee
on the future of the denomination,
posted this quote from John Calvin on Facebook this week:

“The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life. It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only, but it is fully understood when it possesses the whole soul and penetrates to the inner recesses of the heart.”

The quote is from a small devotional booklet
made up of sections from Calvin's major theological treatise,
Institutes of the Christian Religion.

The faith, hope, and love
are the essence of the Gospel –
faith in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit,
hope for the future of the world,
and love for all who will flourish in that hoped-for future.
Their combined energy grasps us in the depths of our beings
and transforms us into the beings God has created us to be.
Out of that gift of grace emerges our freedom –
freedom to be faithful, hopeful, and loving.
In that freedom, and that freedom alone,
we will flourish as mature children of God.

The specific issue of food offered to idols
that Paul addresses in this passage
is a bit foreign to most people in North America.
It may still be an issue in some of the cultures
from which you have come to this land.

But there are some underlying themes that we all face.

Our idols are not generally images of divine figures and forces.
Instead, they are the material and social things that we worship –
money, power, prestige, celebrity, control, safety, security.
We live in a culture addicted to materialism,
to the acquisition of things in a desperate search for these results.

The Gospel frees us from that idolatrous addiction.
Material things and social relationships are set in their proper context –
as gifts from God designed to enable us to live out our hope
in faith and love.

That's the core message of this passage.
Live out Christ's gift of hope in faith and love.
Live in that freedom in ways that model God's Love,
that model the grace of Jesus Christ,
and that model the mercy of the Holy Spirit.

In your freedom, remain sensitive to the example that your whole being,
your whole way *of* being,
is presenting to others.

God has made human beings to be a powerful influence.
We can use that power for good or for ill.
The gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ
enables us to use it for good,
empowers us in faith to live hopeful, loving lives
designed to be a blessing to the whole of creation.

This is a gift most wondrous.
It is a gift worth celebrating.
It is a gift that the world desperately needs.

Let us go forth and live it with abandon and delight.