

### Call to Worship

Intervening God, through Jesus Christ your will and purpose for our lives was made known.

**We praise you for being with us as your divine plan unfolds in each life and in the church.**

We experience your presence in both the ordinary moments of work and worship, and in the extraordinary moments in which surprising acts reveal you to us.

**We are often amazed and ever humbled by Christ's faithful love and awesome deeds.**

### Prayer of Invocation

**Why are we so startled by the work of the gospel? Why are we, who profess to believe in Jesus, surprised by the great works of the savior in the world today? Help us to hear your word today as if it were freshly written. Bless us with wonder as we read once more from your Word. Truly, Lord, you are in this place! We know that you are the one true God, and we are your people, witnesses to the light. These things we pray as one family in Christ, Amen.**

### The Word

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning meat that has been sacrificed to a false god: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes people arrogant, but love builds people up.

**If anyone thinks they know something, they don't yet know as much as they should know. But if someone loves God, then they are known by God.**

So concerning the actual food involved in these sacrifices to false gods, we know that a false god isn't anything in this world, and that there is no God except for the one God. Granted, there are so-called "gods," in heaven and on the earth, as there are many gods and many lords.

**However, for us believers, There is one God the Father. All things come from him, and we belong to him. And there is one Lord Jesus Christ. All things exist through him, and we live through him.**

But not everybody knows this. Some are eating this food as though it really is food sacrificed to a real idol, because they were used to idol worship until now. Their conscience is weak because it has been damaged.

**Food won't bring us close to God. We're not missing out if we don't eat, and we don't have any advantage if we do eat. But watch out or else this freedom of yours might be a problem for those who are weak.**

Suppose someone sees you (the person who has knowledge) eating in an idol's temple. Won't the person with a weak conscience be encouraged to eat the meat sacrificed to false gods? The weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed by your knowledge.

**You sin against Christ if you sin against your brothers and sisters and hurt their weak consciences this way. This is why, if food causes the downfall of my brother or sister, I won't eat meat ever again, or else I may cause my brother or sister to fall.**

### Living the Word

I know it is hard to believe, but you have been chosen and are sitting right now between Jennifer Lopez and Steven Tyler. Today you are going to become one of the American Idol judges. Don't ask how you got here, just ask yourself: Do I know what I believe about God well enough to be a judge?

I was very surprised to get home one Thursday evening in 2015 and find my husband Bob and our friend Howie, mesmerized by the American Idol Finals. They aren't musicians, but they know what they like for music and they each had their opinions of who should be saved and who should go.

As the evening went on they discussed what they thought were poor past decisions, and cheered their new favorite. I have seen this type of TV Fever over a football game or the World Cup of Soccer, but this was a new one for me.

In this letter from the Apostle Paul to the new Christians at Corinth, he is trying to coach them from a distance about how to be community with all persons around them, not just the other Christians. He tells them that concerning food issues, the Christians know that food given for idols to other gods, isn't a problem because there aren't any other gods; just one true God.

But he then shares with them that not everyone has this knowledge, so to judge them is to puff yourself up, while looking down on others who don't understand what you do. This can only lead to broken relationships, not winning anyone to Christ. Food will not bring us closer to God or pull us away from God, but if something we do becomes a stumbling block for others, we sin against Christ, who put himself out of the way, for others to know God.

The Corinthians were trying to reach people who had known idol worship all of their lives, and some would take a long time to let go of their old beliefs. What is safe for leading one, may be quite unsafe for another. Paul's question is: How does one's behavior affect the faith of a fellow believer.

Nothing should be judged just by knowledge. What if you really were put on the judge's panel for what we idolize? Actually, you do this every day. Yet we as Christians know that there are to be no idols, but the one true God. Knowledge can be an idol, something you feed and honor, setting aside all others for more learning.

The one thing I learned very quickly at Seminary was: The more I knew, the less I knew. Each new question answered, came with a whole new list of questions. Even so, I came home with a 'holier than thou' attitude because I now thought I had so much more knowledge than others.

I have a husband who often lives a better Christian attitude than I and he knows when it is time to keep me accountable to what I preach. Bob let me know I had become self-righteous and sometimes difficult to be with. I had become judgmental about what others said and did, and I believed that I was better than them. After review and repentance, I was able to be more relaxed around others; both in my church work and at home. Bob says that I am bearable now...

I still have standards for myself, and I draw that line at what language can be used in my home. Also, I don't allow myself to put money on the table if I play card games. This is self preservation as I have seen too many people begin small with swearing and gambling and not be able to stop. I don't want to be that person, so I don't want to begin.

Do I think gambling is wrong? I just know it is wrong for me. If you make a different choice, it is your choice and is OK as long as it doesn't hurt others. No one has any right to claim a right, indulge in a pleasure, or demand a liberty which may ruin another. Even if something is OK for you, if it harms another you should not tempt them, and make a different choice.

Christian Freedom is not the right to choose to do as one wished; it is not a lack of law, restrictions and requirements; but instead, Christian Freedom is grounded in love; God's love for us through Jesus Christ. Martin Luther said this: [A] Christian is perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." That is what it means to live 'in Christ.' We need to use our knowledge of God and Christ to avoid sin. Remember the greatest commandment is to love God with all of your heart and soul and mind. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Your knowledge can become something that puffs you up. You can know it is happening when that little voice in your head tells you that you know more than others so you are more worthy.

You begin to see that you are smarter than all of those around you and you say things to let them know as well. It is true you may know more about some things than others do, but instead of letting them feel like they are less than you, work to help them get to where you are at or speak at the level that they can understand.

Knowledge can be very individual focused, versus wisdom and knowing love, which works to build up the community. Once again, it is not just 'all about you', but about being able to live together in peace. Are our actions focused on self or community?

Many of you in the congregation are in the same situation to the people of Corinth. Some prefer to worship in a more traditional style, while some of you prefer a more contemporary style. In some churches this alone can cause the church to split. Church divisions only prove that we don't share well.

I have served in churches where the kitchen was an issue. Some members called it 'my church kitchen;' some called it 'our church kitchen;' both of these have some element of possession, and tell of divisions: them and us. Then there are churches that call it 'the church kitchen,' not belonging to anyone or any group of people, which says that no one wants to be responsible. It all comes down to treating each other with loving consideration and respect.

What practices should the church condemn and condone? V. Bruce Rigdon, retired president of the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit Michigan list these issues that he sees some churches struggling with now: "How to deal with poverty in our society; whether or not to keep an American Flag in the church sanctuary; whether gay and lesbian Christians should hold leadership positions in our churches." He then goes on to say, "knowing what is right and wrong isn't enough – even if you are right, love is greater than knowledge.

Elites want to discuss the logical implications of their 'knowledge,' Paul focuses on the ethical implications. If love is a matter of knowledge, it is God knowing us, not what we know. Churches do split over the things we cannot agree on. But there is another way.

General Conference for the United Methodist Church happens in the Spring, every four years. It is the decision making body for the whole United Methodist Church, with delegates from all over the world. Before it began in 2012, at a pre General Conference meeting, Rev Sally Dyck, then the Minnesota Bishop shared this with those attending:

"Often at General Conferences I have found myself on the losing side of an issue. Yet I am always treated with respect; this actually worked to build relationships and made the sting of loss much less. This has given me hope that as people of the United Methodist Church we can demonstrate a more excellent way in the midst of all of our differences."

She went on to say, "I remember well a time when a delegate was on the losing side in a legislative committee and wasn't really paying attention. It was late at night and he accidently voted against his own interest and it was very close vote, [within one or two votes].

And a person from 'the other side' stopped the show and said 'I don't think you meant to vote that way. [We need a]Do over!' It may sound small, but it sticks out as one of many incidences when people cared and related to each other."

God's Grace, God's knowledge of us and loving us despite our sins, is an example for us of how we can lead and guide and forgive. Jesus came to teach us how to have the compassion to love each other enough to set ourselves aside for the sake of those around us. When you love someone – really love them, you put them before yourself.

That same year, I took a break from sermon writing one Friday long enough to read some emails. I received one from Father Jim Brinkman, via the New Richmond Ministerial email link. It was a letter from the office of the Catholic Bishop for the Diocese of Superior, The Most Reverend Peter F. Christensen.

I will read you a part of the letter:

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced last week that almost all employers, including Catholic employers, will be forced to offer their employees health coverage that includes sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs, and contraception. This blatant disregard for our religious values is difficult to reconcile with the current Administration's earlier assurance that it would provide for "robust" conscience protection for religious groups in health care reform. Almost all health insurers will be forced to include those "services" in the health policies they write. And almost all individuals will be forced to buy that coverage as a part of their policies.

No matter how you feel about this, it is a great trauma and dilemma for the Catholic community. I then wrote to Father Jim Brinkman, and shared that though we may not all believe exactly the same things, when our Catholic brothers and sisters are hurting, we hurt with them. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church said: "Though we may not think alike, may we not all love alike?"

A young lady named Susan relates an experience she had in a seminary class, given by her teacher, Dr Smith. She says that Dr Smith was known for his elaborate object lessons. Now one particular day, Susan walked into the seminary and knew they were in for a fun day.

On the wall was a big target and on a nearby table were many darts. Dr. Smith told the students to draw a picture of someone that they disliked, or someone who had made them angry, and he would allow them to throw darts at the person's picture.

Susan's friend drew a picture of the one who had stolen her boyfriend. Another friend drew a picture of his little brother. Susan drew a picture of a former friend, putting a great deal of detail into her drawing, even drawing pimples on the face. Susan was very pleased with the overall effect she had achieved.

The class lined up and began throwing darts. Some of the students threw their darts with such force that their targets were ripping apart. Susan looked forward to her turn, and was filled with disappointment when Dr. Smith, because of time limits, asked the students to return to their seats. As Susan sat thinking about how angry she was because she didn't have a chance to throw any darts at her target. Dr. Smith began removing the target from the wall.

Underneath the target was a picture of Jesus. Needless to say a hush fell over the room as each student viewed the mangled picture of Jesus; holes and jagged marks covered His face and His eyes were pierced. It was then that Dr. Smith said only these words... 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' ( Matthew 25:40. )

No other words were necessary; as tears filled eyes of the students, as they focused only on the mangled picture of Jesus Christ. When we hurt others we hurt Christ. You are invited this week to reflect on, to judge and to choose your idols carefully, and then look to see if you have been imposing your idols unjustly on others...