

Sermon
Christ Church, Cooperstown
Epiphany 4B 2012

“But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.” I Corinthians 8:15

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“You will also,” the headmaster concluded our conference, “organize and lead the debating society.” “I don’t really know much about debate,” I mumbled back. “I expect you’ll manage,” was his reply. It was the way of things in boarding school life, of course. I was a third year teacher, handling four history classes a day on the strength of one educational psychology class. I was the junior boy’s basketball coach, even though I hardly knew one end of a whistle from the other. And now, I would be the advisor to the Saint James Debating Society. You do a lot of improvising in boarding school life, you learn things on the fly. It’s a small community, there never are enough experts in anything. You manage, as Father Dunnan had said.

I was rather excited about starting up a debating society, to be honest. It wasn’t to be that serious of an affair, not a forensics team or anything, just something to keep the kids entertained after dinner once a month on a Friday night. We had a new junior who had been a very keen debater at her old school in Washington, and she had been lobbying the headmaster about this ever since she was admitted. It looked good as a new offering on the school website. I had long been interested in rhetoric, the way we make arguments, the ideas behind our assumptions. I thought I was fairly well informed about most controversial subjects that would be of interest to teenagers. I hoped that the debating would make my students clearer thinkers, and more articulate communicators, that it would improve essays and class discussions.

And so we started, once a month tackling a big topic—two teams, three speakers each on immigration reform or capital punishment or the proper drinking age. I met with one team at lunch on Tuesday and the other at lunch on Thursday. We sketched out some clear arguments, tried to indentify some philosophical underpinnings, guessed at the other side’s rejoinders. And then, invariably, on Friday night it was a disaster. There was no philosophy, little logic, and even less charity. Two groups of three people battered each other with statistics and slick talking points from some pundit’s blog. They talked past each other, shouted and gesticulated for three

quarters of an hour until time ran out and I gratefully set aside my stopwatch for another month. Of all the things I did at Saint James, that debating society was my greatest regret.

I should have known that it would turn out this way. Kids, like most of us want to win, they don't want to think. And they've grown up in this world of dueling weblogs and packaged talking points, MSNBC and Fox News: lots and lots of grownups shouting past each other. They know that if you want to make an argument, you just type "immigration reform pro" into google, and there it will be, with just what you need to clobber anybody else—even though they might be typing "immigration reform con" into the same search engine.

I don't like debate, at least I don't like it the way we tend to do it in modern America. And I have my doubts that we ever really did it so much better in ages past. It was certainly proving a problem in the Church in Corinth. Corinth had been an ancient Greek city state, home to the people who invented debate in the first place. There was a large stone *bema*, or orator's platform in the middle of the city's marketplace. I stood beside it when I visited the ruins of the city a few years ago. The Greeks loved to argue—they liked the showmanship, the clever display of wit, and the ancient oratory that I've read can be just as biting and proud as anything my students attempted at Saint James.

There was debating going on inside the church—maybe not formal debating, but a rather bitter kind of argumentation. People were wrestling it out to prove they were in the right. The topic in question was whether Christians could eat meat that had been previously sacrificed to a pagan god. It was a hot topic because it was new and it pertained to everyday life. There was also at least some ambiguity in the Scriptures about it, so you could throw together a pretty clear argument for either side.

Corinth was full of temples to the Greek and Roman gods. People visited these temples to make sacrifices, and when they made a sacrifice, only part of the animal was burned on the altar. The rest became the property of the priests, who cut it up into steaks and roasts and sold it to pay their salaries and keep up the buildings. Probably most of the meat that you could buy in a Gentile city like Corinth had been previously sacrificed to a pagan god.

To help you see this, we're going to have to have one of those Tuesday lunchtime sessions I had for my debaters. Let's break down the argument...The question was whether the meat's involvement in the pagan worship somehow defiled it, so that it became an improper thing for Christians to eat. The Scriptures of course, which then meant the Old Testament, had

been written for Jews, who didn't live in a world where the only meat one could find had been sacrificed to a pagan god. So there wasn't any straight answer from God's Word to settle the matter.

The debate pretty much hung on the status of the pagan gods. Some people—Saint Paul calls them the strong party—pulled up a strain from the teaching of the prophets that said that pagan gods were complete non-entities. The whole ceremony of a pagan sacrifice was just a dumb show, and God had blessed everything and made it good when He created it in the first place. Eating was just fine, in fact, doing it boldly was a way of asserting Christian freedom and proving how silly pagan worship really was.

The other side—Saint Paul calls them the weak party—probably turned to some passages in the Psalms that seemed to suggest that there was something to these pagan gods, something quite sinister. They were like demons, and their worship exerted an evil power over those who engaged in it. To eat meat that came from those temples came awfully close to communing with those demons—it was a kind of inverse Eucharist, if you will—feeding on the body and blood of evil spirits. To get out from under the power of paganism, they argued, Christians needed to avoid any association with the temples, including eating meat that had been offered in them and later offered for sale.

Often, when presented with a matter of divided opinions like this, Saint Paul issues a clear judgment—they had asked for his advice after all. He won't leave them in any doubt about the truth of the resurrection a few chapters later. But here he does something quite different. He sketches out the arguments at some length that one could offer from either position. But even before he does this, he says, in essence, that there isn't really one answer to this question. "Food will not commend us to God," he writes, "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." The real problem in Corinth isn't that people don't have the right answer to this contested question, but that by their arguments they are destroying one another. "Knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up," he says, "If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know."

The arguments had gotten personal, as they usually do. This was an important issue, after all. Many of the Corinthians were recent converts from paganism, and they associated the meat with the way they used to worship. Maybe some of them were being forced to eat the meat to prove they had really put it behind them, or others were boasting about eating the meat precisely

because they knew it would offend them. The debate, Paul stresses, is destroying people's souls. It is pushing them to act against their consciences, and so it's wounding their capacity to know God and to follow His will for them. He calls what's happening in the church a sin against the members of your family, and therefore a sin against Christ.

Loving your brother is more important than winning the argument. And love demands knowledge—not talking point knowledge, but insight and sympathy into the situation of your sister or brother. You must get to know the experience of your sister, consider her conscience, think about what's on her plate, before you charge in with the right answer. And maybe sometimes, you'll need to go along with what your brother or sister needs instead of what seems best to you. Sometimes, you'll have to sacrifice your own preference to build up someone else.

Saint Paul is delving into pretty deep waters here, and it can be easy to misunderstand him. He's not a relativist. He doesn't really believe there's a "my truth" and a "your truth." But especially when we talk about moral questions, he does think that the individual conscience is very important. We can only receive the truth in the way that our experience has prepared us to receive it. We can only approach God from where we have been led so far. The next right step won't always be the same for each of us, and it takes patience, discernment and compassion to move in the right direction. As members of Christ's body, we are called to help guide each other along that path. My brother is responsible for his own next step, but I am also my brother's keeper. I need to make sure that I don't trip him up by what I do or say.

There has always been conflict in the church, and I expect that until Christ returns, there will always be conflict in the church. We are community of people who take ideas seriously, who aim to know to know the truth and who believe that the moral choices are deeply important. All of that sets us up to disagree. But we don't have to talk past each other. We don't have to tear each other down. If we end up disagreeing with each other, at least we can avoid taking our cues on how to do it from the world. Because before we were people who happen to disagree, we were sinners who found new life through Christ's death and resurrection. Before we are weaks or strongs, conservatives or liberals, Catholics or Protestants, we are brothers and sisters, members of the one life-giving Body of Jesus. And in that Body, love comes before knowledge, empathy before assertiveness, compassion before debate.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.