

Years ago, when the sexuality debates in the Episcopal Church were particularly hot and toxic, I longed for a controversy that didn't involve sex or gender. And I found it: the coffee creamer controversy.

At my sponsoring parish in New York City, there was always—ALWAYS—a quart of milk next to the coffee at coffee hour. Real milk, that came from a cow, in a city where all food had to be brought in over a bridge or through a tunnel.

When I moved to the Midwest—you know, the place where the cows LIVE—I found, over and over, that the coffee hour coffee—in addition to being pretty awful—was accompanied by little bowls of fine off-white powder: nondairy creamer. It was an abomination, in my eyes, and I railed against it whenever I could.

It turns out the issue was not so straightforward. One day, as I was performing my rant against the horrors of nondairy creamer, my interlocutor said, "But what about those who can't consume dairy products?" I was chastened, and then delighted: I had found my non-sexual church controversy! As the years have passed, that issue has gotten even more wonderfully complicated: How should we source the cow's milk—and the coffee, for that matter? What milk alternatives should be provided? Soy? an allergen. Almond? bad for the environment. Is decaf ever OK?

I'm joking, of course, but when I began reflecting on the text we heard today from 1 Corinthians, I was reminded that the Church has never been without controversy. Since the earliest days, the Christian community has

had to figure out how to follow Jesus in real life, in real community, with real bodies, with all of the accompanying complications and contradictions. First, it was Easter Day: should we believe the women? Then it was ethnic discrimination against Greek-speaking widows, keeping kosher, and whether non-Jewish (male) converts needed to be circumcised.

The issue of whether it was appropriate for Christians to eat food offered to idols was one of those early hot issues. In many contexts, the local (pagan) temple was the only source for meat. In cosmopolitan cities like Corinth, the temple was also a site for social and business networking, usually accompanied by meals. Richard Hays writes in his commentary on 1 Cor.:

[T]here may have been a socioeconomic aspect to the argument about idol food. Feasts held in temples were common events in the daily life of a Greco-Roman city. . . . The wealthier Corinthians would have been invited to meals in such places as a regular part of their social life, to celebrate birthdays, weddings, healings attributed to the god, or other important occasions. Examples of such invitations have been preserved. . . . For those few Corinthian Christians who were among the wealthier class (cf. 1:26–29), their public and professional duties virtually required the networking that occurred through attending and sponsoring such events. To eat the sacrificial meat served on such occasions was simple social courtesy; to refuse to share in the meal would be an affront to the host. At the same time, the specifically religious connotations of the act might not have seemed particularly important.¹

But there was more to this issue, one that highlighted other differences in the community:

¹Hays, Richard B.. *First Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (pp. 136-137). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition, citing Gerd Theissen.

Within the social circle of the poorer Corinthians, on the other hand, such meat-eating would not have been commonplace. Meat was not an ordinary part of their diet; it may have been accessible only at certain public religious festivals where there was a general distribution of meat. Consequently, the wealthy and powerful, who also had the most advanced education, would take the eating of meat in stride and readily accept the view that it was a matter of spiritual indifference; at the same time, however, the poor might regard meat as laden with . . . religious connotations (see Theissen, 121–43). Thus, the distinction between “the weak” and those with “knowledge” may have fallen, at least to some extent, along socioeconomic lines.”²

Throughout this letter, Paul addresses issues that have complex, communal layers, that is, showing that are not just about logical arguments but also relationships and identity. He starts the letter making it clear that correct knowledge is not a sign of spiritual advancement. In today’s passage, he affirms the “liberal” argument about “idol meat”—there are no other gods, so the meat from the temples has no real spiritual meaning—but then says, essentially, “now what?”

In the middle of this argument Paul plants the key:

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

These words echo the *Shema*, the core of Jewish faith: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One.” The essential knowledge, Paul is telling the Corinthians (and us), is knowing who God is and, through Christ, who we are.

² *Ibid.*

The starting point, the process, and the goal are all wrapped up in this: “We have one God. We have one Lord, Jesus Christ. This defines who we are.” The “we” as defined by one God and one Lord in Jesus, means that knowledge alone is not sufficient in making decisions that affect the community. “We” include the weak and the strong, the wise and the foolish, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor—all redeemed by Christ, all committed to following Him, all bound together in one body—the metaphor he unpacks just a few chapters later. My discipleship, my following of Jesus, is done within that community and cannot be separate from that.

It’s not that we should not have debates about Christian life. Every generation of Christian has had to wrestle with important, thorny questions about what it means to follow Jesus in their age. Paul engages with such controversies in pretty much every letter. (As my husband has noted: if things were going well, Paul wouldn’t be writing!) Circumcision, marriage, legal disputes, liturgy, keeping the law—Paul engages in careful (and sometimes convoluted) argumentation about them.

Lying behind all of Paul’s letters, but not explicitly unpacked by him, is the question of how to discern whether a controversy should be framed as Paul frames the eating of idol meat, as one in which Christians in good faith can disagree and in which some may choose to sacrifice their knowledge-based privilege for the good of their siblings in Christ, or whether it is something controversial, but non-negotiable, like Paul’s stance on circumcision. This is what helped Paul—and what helps the Christian community—discern which arguments are about things that we have to hold in tension (idol meat and

marriage) and what are things that are not negotiable (circumcision and protecting the weak).

In the Episcopal Church, we spent many years allowing bishops not to ordain women or allowing priests to limit full inclusion of gay and lesbian people, so as not to violate their consciences. We have, however, come to a point where, as a Church, we understand that the full inclusion and leadership of women and of gay and lesbian people (and getting better about trans- and nonbinary folks) is not negotiable; this is a matter of identity, not of conscience, so Paul's admonition about not being a stumbling block doesn't apply.

On the other hand, the Episcopal Church has not taken such a stance about war and pacifism. We have both a Bishop for the Armed Forces and the Episcopal Peace Fellowship. Perhaps even closer to home, we are still in the midst of a messy, fraught, often reactive debate as a church about whether baptism should be upheld as a prerequisite for taking communion. This parish has taken a clear stance on that issue. How might Paul's words about "knowledge" and "love" shape, not just how we understand the Eucharist, but how we talk about it and enact it?

Some of this we won't know, we can't know, until we have argued about it for a while, until we have been able to discern whether our identity as a community, as the whole Body of Christ, is violated by holding the tension. Some of it should be clearer than we allow it to be.

In the end, though, what Paul shows us so powerfully throughout this letter, and his others, is that our primary lens for responding to hard issues is reminding ourselves of who God is and who we are. This is what I missed in my initial crusade for real dairy at coffee hour: other people, other members of my community, whose experience I had ignored and omitted. I had missed the freedom that loving God offers: in loving God, I am known and I have nothing to lose, nothing to prove. We are one people, each of us and all of us loved beyond measure by one God. We are the Body of Christ, followers of Jesus, redeemed by his death and resurrection and committed to living and loving as he did. In the end it is about love.

“Knowledge puffs up.” Or, “knowledge inflates,” as David Bentley Hart’s new translation puts it.³ “Love builds up.” I could make the best, most watertight argument—but winning on those terms is as substantial as a balloon. Making the argument—which we do need to do, as Paul does—is just the beginning. We need to ask about what the issue means for our siblings in Christ, what it means for Christ himself as we encounter him in the world. We may choose to sacrifice something we convinced we are free to do for the sake of a sibling in Christ. But the freedom of knowledge is nothing compared to the freedom of being known, redeemed, and beloved.

Christians will always be arguing about something. Things may not always be clear for a while, and it may take a while. We may also get it “wrong” on the knowledge front. But if we stay rooted in who we are and whose we are together, we will not get it wrong in love.

³ David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: a Translation*, Yale University Press, 2017