

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

This morning we have two readings about call and one about prostitution. I am going with the prostitution theme today. Not because it is more salacious, but because next week's gospel reading is also about being called, and we don't get another shot at prostitution for awhile. Having said that, the reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is not really about prostitution, not really. But as is so often the case, we need a little context to make sense of what we read.

Ancient Corinth was more like New Orleans than Corinth, MS. It was a very cosmopolitan town. It was a major port and the place where goods traveling by sea could be transshipped to inland destinations. There were always travelers in Corinth, always new faces and new ideas. Christianity made its way there through Paul, but now Paul is realizing that he may have, as they say, created a monster.

Apparently, there were several factions within the church in Corinth. Some identified as being baptized by Apollos; others by Cephas; others just "in Christ." It was such a big deal that Paul writes that he is glad that he didn't baptize that many folks, or else they would form their own group, too. Things are so bad that Paul tells them that he didn't go there to baptize them but to preach the gospel. Paul would rather they didn't even know about baptism than have such a contrary view of the matter.

The bad part is, the baptismal factions dividing the church are just the start. The people just don't get it. Paul admits that he didn't get into any heavy duty theology with them, but that was because they weren't ready for it. Before our reading today, Paul tells them that he fed them with milk because they weren't ready for meat. But apparently, they thought they were not only ready for meat, they were ready to cook for themselves. All kinds of ideas were coming out in Corinth. Paul had apparently talked about being saved by grace through Christ, and then at least some of the Corinthians took that to mean that there was no more sin.

Apparently, members of the church were cheating each other in business deals. Then, instead of settling the matter among themselves, they would go to the pagan courts for judgment. Paul is aghast. If you don't trust each other enough to settle your differences internally, how can you transform the world? Then, to top it off, word had come to Paul that one of the members of the church there was shacking up with his step-mother. Not even the pagans condone that sort of thing Paul tells them. Paul has a red hot mess on his hands.

According to chapter five of this letter, Paul had actually written another letter to the Corinthians before this one. It is lost to history. So First Corinthians is actually at least the second letter Paul wrote to them. He keeps writing but it is not doing much good. It seems that the Corinthians can't get the hang of forgiveness and responsibility. Just because we should be able to count on the forgiveness of others, it doesn't mean that we can do whatever the heck we want. Forgiveness is for mistakes, not malice aforethought.

That is where our reading today picks up. Paul has spent the better part of five chapters telling the Corinthians what they are doing wrong. Hanging out with prostitutes is almost an afterthought. That doesn't mean if that is what you have been doing that you can relax; it means that if you were thinking, "Well at least I don't go to prostitutes" it doesn't mean you are off the hook. But people like to do that, don't they? Pick a sin that they don't commit and make that one a big deal, while trying to minimize their own personal favorites. I may do thusly and so, but I don't do *that*.

But that is not the way it works. We can't focus on the failures of others in order to draw attention away from our own. Jesus talked about removing 2x4s from our own eyes before trying to deal with the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye. At the same time, we have a responsibility to hold one another accountable. It's a tough line to walk between judgmental and enabling. It helps to remember that in order to "speak the truth in love" there must first be love; there must first be relationship; there must first be community.

A lot of folks today are very quick to want to point out to others what they are doing wrong. But St. Paul writes something interesting in the chapter right before today's reading, something that never actually makes it into the lectionary, but it's worth hearing:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons— not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. ... For what have I to do with judging those outside? ... God will judge those outside.

Now, Paul does say that for those who call themselves brother or sister in the community, we are to shun them when they persist in their sin, but that needs to be done as a community. The individual does not have the right to decide who's in and who's out. If you are wondering how that happens in the Episcopal Church, it is on page 409 in the Book of Common Prayer. I'll give you a hint, the priest is not seen as an individual in that case but as the embodiment of the community. In other words, I'll let you know when you may shun someone otherwise our default position is to love.

Paul had a great deal to say to the church in Corinth, and most of our Epistle readings over the next few weeks come from that book. But it is important to remember that we read only bits and pieces of it. Without context, we might delude ourselves into thinking that the only thing Paul cared about was whether we slept with prostitutes or not. And as long as you didn't, you were okay. But we shouldn't let ourselves off the hook so easily. While there are some sins that might not tempt us, there are plenty more that do. And each one separates us from God and from each other.

We are called to enjoy the freedom that a life in Christ affords us while never forgetting the responsibility that goes with such a call. And while we have a responsibility to keep each other accountable, quite often we have plenty to do just working with our own sin. We are to build each other up; work together to further God's kingdom; love one another; and worship our God together in peace and concord. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*