

"Gather 'Round the Table"

Psalm 65:9-13; I Corinthians 8:4-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 23, 2014 – Reign of Christ Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

Just a few more days and it will be Thanksgiving. This is one of those holidays that holds many happy memories and most of us look forward to it with anticipation. We recall those past tables piled high with turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes, corn, green beans, cranberry sauce, salads, jello, rolls, and—of course— pumpkin pie. Here's a feast day that most of us don't feel guilty about, though we'll surely move away from the table so stuffed that we'll swear off eating for a week. And if, by chance, you don't get your fill the first time around, you can have an opportunity to sample the turkey and leftovers again... and again... and again.

Our New Testament scripture today also refers to food, but in a somewhat different way. The letter of Paul to the young church at Corinth deals with many of the practical concerns they have as they attempt to live faithfully in a predominantly pagan culture. There are commonplace matters of daily living which cause them concern and they do not want to misstep.

In Corinth, as in other parts of the Greek and Roman world, many gods were worshipped. The major deities all had temples erected to them where people could worship and sacrifice animals. This was such a widespread practice that slaughterhouses were often erected near the temples to dispose of the carcasses. A portion of the slain animal would be burned in the altar fires, but most of the meat would be left over. Some of this would go to the priests, but then the rest would make its way to the marketplace.

For those who worshipped a particular deity such consecrated meat would be in high demand, especially for banquets. Not only was it choice, but there was a widespread belief that such meat would impart wisdom and strength to those who ate it. For the most part, though, the meat from sacrificed animals and other animals would be intermixed, and no one could be sure of its derivation. This proved to be a major problem for the early Christians.

Some considered food derived from pagan rituals to be tainted for believers. One solution would be to eat only animals that they, themselves, raised, but this was impractical for city-dwellers. Another alternative would be to buy only food certified as never having been offered to one of the gods. Most couldn't afford this assurance. As much as this question of eating bothered some Christians, others felt that it didn't really matter since these gods didn't exist and ritual sacrifice in their name was meaningless.

Paul, in his reply to the question, seems to side more with this latter group. His letter reflects the words of Jesus who said, "It is not what goes into a person's mouth that make him unclean; rather, what comes out of it." Yet, Paul gives the Corinthians a caution: "It is not everyone, however, who understands this. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

The apostle's concern is that some of the recent converts might fall back again into paganism. They have not been so far removed from former practices that they could be drawn back again. So while members of the church could do as they pleased in regard to consuming of this meat, Paul urges them to consider its influence upon others. The pagan gods are of no importance; they can be ignored. A brother or sister who might be tempted to fall away, however, cannot be ignored. Paul says that, if it were he, he would forego all meat from the temple slaughterhouses, lest it be misunderstood and cause a weaker member to stumble.

Well, this isn't an issue for most of us today. Meat packing is a commercial enterprise regulated by the Department of Agriculture. It does, though, raise some valid points that we can take away from this lesson. The first is that we are always an example to others, and especially to our children. They watch closely what we say and do. They see our mistakes as well as our finer moments. We show them what we value by what we do and how we do it.

We're also an example of the Christian life to those who stand outside the faith. If we show them a person who is no different in going about daily living than a non-Christian, then we are not the ambassadors we are called to be. If we are afraid to live what we believe, then we are no model for others who may be searching for a better way. We have an influence, for good or for bad.

The other point from our scripture is that we need to be careful not to let today's idols slip into our lives, so that they usurp the rightful place of God. Anything can assume this role, and need not be thought of religious in particular.

Consider this example shared by a social worker. "One of the most persistent hobbyists I have ever met is a person who collects models of elephants. This man is a retired builder who has travelled globally, so he has assembled his collection from many different lands.

"When you enter his house, you are greeted by a large elephant, nearly as tall as a human, sitting by the fireplace. Several others are sitting around the room,. This man has added one large room to his home to be used primarily for his collection. In that room he has rows of shelves extending all the way around the room almost to the ceiling. On these shelves he has elephants of many different sizes and colors. Some of them are very small and fragile while others are large and heavy.

"In addition to the elephants on display, he has boxes of them for which he has no room. As I talked to him, he was concerned with making plans to expand his house again in order to display more of his collection. He said he was not sure just how many he possessed, but there were several thousand.

"Visiting with the man is interesting for a while as he tells how he began his collection; however, after a bit you learn that he is unable to talk about things that may be of interest to you. He is so completely absorbed in his collection that he cannot chat about other things. His hobby has isolated him from other people."

The theologian Paul Tillich once said: "Idolatry is being ultimately concerned about that which is **not** ultimate." You could say that about the elephant collector. We can laugh at his

obsession because it has become so out of proportion. “Idolatry is being ultimately concerned about that which is not ultimate.”

Now we not be into elephants. I’ll tell you this, though, the outcome of the Ohio State-Michigan game next week will be all-consuming for many people. Football becomes much more important than what it is due. Commentators pour over even the tiniest scrap of information prior to the contest, then afterward endlessly dissect the game play by play. When the coach wins you worship him; when he loses you threaten to find another gridiron god to replace him. Idolatry crops up lots of places.

Anything can become obsessive: a job, the stock market, shopping, television—you name it. Anything can take on more importance than it deserves. Paul, echoing Jesus, reminds us that there can truly be only one thing at the center of our lives, and that is God. Anything else elevates the mundane into the realm of the divine, the secular into the place of the sacred. Our idols today are not shapes carved out of rock, but cars and computers and anything else which can cause us to be compulsive in our attention. Idols can consume all our time and energy, leaving us with little for what really is crucial.

So in a few days, as you gather around the Thanksgiving table, I hope that you might give some special thought to just what is important to you this year. Think what draws down your attention and ask critically if it is deserving of the place it occupies in your life. Think also of how your priorities affect others. What would they say are the most important things in your life? Make sure idolatry hasn’t snuck in when you weren’t aware.

This Thanksgiving may you truly give thanks for all the many and varied blessings you have. Moreover, be thankful to God for the gift of Christ, who brings us salvation and meaning. For food, for friendship, for fellowship, for so many things we ought to be honestly grateful. So gather ‘round the table on Thursday in anticipation of the feast about to begin, but reach first for a prayer of gratitude before you’re tempted to grab that turkey leg. That’s the proper order.