

4 Epiphany Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

On first glance, the passage we heard from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians doesn't seem very relevant to our lives today. In it Paul talks about meat sacrificed to idols. Basically the practice of the time was for people to slaughter an animal in sacrifice to one of many gods or goddesses, eat some of the meat in a certain ritual, and then the person who brought the animal for the slaughter could put the rest of the meat on sale at the local market. Paul speaks of some Christians in Corinth who are "weak" when it comes to eating this type of meat, but Paul does not mean weak as an insult. He means that for certain people, eating this sacrificed meat would weaken their resolve and moral compass. But Paul has no problem with these Christians. He understands that they are in a certain place in their faith journey and are simply trying to avoid anything that would make them stray from the right path. No, Paul's issue is with those "strong" Christians, those Christians who think they are smarter than those "weak" Christians. These self-centered Christians are right that eating meat that was sacrificed to idols isn't harmful since no God but our God truly exists, but they allow this knowledge to puff themselves up, while looking down on other Christians who do not yet have this same knowledge.

Though most of us today don't have to struggle with the moral implications of eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols, there are many other issues that we as a community struggle with. We don't have to worry about whether it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but there is something that many of us today often ingest, but that causes the weakening of resolve and the destruction of a moral compass in some of us—and that something is alcohol. Alcohol, like meat sacrificed to idols in Paul's time, is something that is almost constantly present in our lives. For those of us who are over 21, alcohol is easily accessible, easily affordable, and is a given at most parties, get-togethers, and even church events that we attend. Some of us may think this abundance of alcohol is not a problem, and that it is up to those who struggle with alcohol addiction to find ways to avoid it—and to a certain extent that is true. Yet Paul would say that those who do NOT struggle with alcohol addiction still have a responsibility to change their own practices in order to help those who do struggle with alcohol addiction. Paul would point out that there are very real and fairly simple things we can do to help our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is true that some of us are able to drink alcohol without having to worry about the side-effects of addiction, but Paul would say to those of us "take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Paul is pointing to the fact that our actions affect each other, and we need to be aware of that and willing to change what we do in order to help someone who is struggling.

Often in our society, we put a lot of focus on ourselves—our concerns, our beliefs, what we think is best for US. But selfishness is not a quality that we as Christians want to have. As Christians, we are each a member of the body of Christ, and if we want the body of Christ to be healthy, it is important to make sure that all members of the body are healthy. As Christians, we don't have the luxury of being concerned only for ourselves. So those of us who do not struggle with alcoholism cannot just do what works for us without giving others a second thought. It is important to take into consideration other members of the body of Christ for whom alcohol is a stumbling block. And there are many simple ways we can do this.

As everyone here probably knows, next week the Eagles are playing in the superbowl. And many of us probably have plans to watch the game, eat some snacks, and maybe indulge in a beer or two. Yet how many of us are hosting a party or attending a party where we know of at least one other person coming who is trying to avoid alcohol? If we are hosting a party, either for this superbowl or in the future, we can consider not offering alcohol, or at least offering non-alcoholic drinks that are just as appealing so that those who are trying to avoid alcohol don't feel left out. This is actually the official policy of the Episcopal church, and it's something we can easily do ourselves. Also, if we are going to a party where there will be alcohol, we can consider not drinking in solidarity with those who are avoiding alcohol. Some may not see the need to avoid drinking if they themselves don't struggle with alcoholism, but I would encourage those of us to think and consider whether drinking in these circumstances is worth it if it causes someone who *does* struggle with alcoholism to stumble.

As members of the body of Christ, it is important for us to not only try to avoid our own stumbling blocks, but to help others to avoid their stumbling blocks as well—it is our responsibility to love and support each other, sometimes putting aside our own wants and desires in order to help someone else achieve theirs. Because alcoholism isn't the only issue that we struggle with as a community. Each of us has our own vices, each of us has something that we avoid because we know it would weaken our faith, or would weaken our moral compass. And we don't have to struggle with these issues of ours alone, and we shouldn't struggle with these issues alone.

I think part of the reason that this church community is gathered here today for worship is because we understand that. We understand that we don't want to have to depend only on ourselves, that we don't want to have to face our personal battles alone. We want to be able to rely on other people when we need help, and we want others to know that they can rely on US. We want to build each other up. We want to build our community up. And we know that if we work together as Christ's body, and we are willing to put aside our own wants in order to be there for someone who needs a helping hand, we can accomplish all that and more. Amen.