

“Responsibly Free”

A Sermon for the Members and Friends of Millburn Congregational UCC

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (The Message)

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. Jed Watson

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We’re Americans. We like our *freedom*. We all do; it’s a shared value across the political spectrum. We’re all equally about freedom, whether we are liberals or conservatives or somewhere in between – the only differences lie in what we think we should be free to do. As for the number one, chief value – freedom - we’re all on the same page.

Freedom is a wonderful thing; please don’t misunderstand what I have to say. It’s a gift, a blessing, meant to be used well. But there have been times in American history when we’ve wondered if we’ve taken our freedom a little too sort of far, to the point where it has started to trump other values. I think maybe we’re at the beginning of one of those times now. Is it possible that in the exercise of our freedoms we’ve crossed a line, and become irresponsible? As individuals? As a culture?

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Some background on our Bible text this morning:

It might seem like one of the stranger and more obscure things the Bible serves up, and it *is* different. But I also think it’s a profoundly insightful passage, and that it offers a unique lens into the Christian soul and an answer to the question, “What is Christianity all about?” So indulge me for a moment, and let me try to unpack it.

Ancient religion was all about sacrifice, which was the heart of the worship service. On behalf of the people, the priest produced an animal – a bird, a sheep, a goat, what have you – and placed it atop a fire that burned in the altar space. The aroma of the roasting meat entrée drifted upward to the heavens and was thought to be pleasing to the god or gods. The idea was that it kept the community on the gods’ good side, if you will; the regular practice of sacrifice could preserve a good relationship, and a special burnt offering might mollify an angry god, so that he (or she) wouldn’t bring a calamity on the community (like an earthquake or a fire). When the aroma had all risen to the heavens and the gods made happy, or placated, there’d still be this animal, which was now food. It would find its way back into circulation; it could become part of a main course at a festival or show up at a market for purchase.

Question: should Christians eat this stuff? That’s the question for the early Church. Should its members eat this meat that had been sacrificed to Apollo or Venus or Neptune or some other foreign god, maybe even the emperor himself (yikes!)? Some Christians avoided it like the plague, fearing that, because it was associated with pagan gods, it was tainted, or polluted, and might cause harm. But you have your, sort of, elite group of Christians, probably a very highly educated group, who say, “Oh come on, that’s stuff’s not dangerous – those silly gods don’t exist – they can’t cause harm. So grow up and eat it – it’s good food. Get over your silly stupid-stitions.” And they’d go on to eat that stuff, in the presence of those who were afraid of it, tempting them to try it themselves.

Here’s where Paul and today’s text come in. Paul gets in the face of these elite types. He says, “Yeah, you’re right. Those gods don’t exist- they’re harmless. You know that; I know that. There’s no problem with this meat. You’re right. Congratulations on your knowledge, your head knowledge, your

intellectual knowledge. And, yeah, sure, you're free to eat that meat and to do it publicly in the way you like to do it. There's no law against it – you're completely within your rights. But think about what affect that might have on those who don't share all of your sophistication and knowledge. They might follow your lead and eat some of that meat themselves and then, as a result, be overcome by guilt and fear, which can be very destructive for people; it can cause all kinds of mental and emotional illness and dis-ease. And all because you insisted on your rights, and on your precious individual freedom."

See what's going on here? Paul's trying to establish an ethic for this new organization called the Church. He's saying to these champions of personal freedom: "Your freedom isn't the chief value here. The chief value is the well-being of your brother and sister. There's a problem with your freedom: when you exercise it without any concern for others it can cause great harm, even when you're completely within your rights. Your freedom needs to be restrained by some sensitivity and some compassion, some concern for the greater good."

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When I'm elected dictator that scripture will be required reading in every high school and college in all the land. No exceptions. Of course, that would be a violation of church and state, but, then again, as dictator I wouldn't care about that. So it would be required reading, even though it's from the Bible. It would be especially emphasized in places like business schools and law schools and schools of public administration and seminaries and anywhere else future leaders are trained. It would be the first class everyone took, and there would be a second course on the same subject just before graduation. Actually, I'd start well before college and grad school. I'd zero in on those high school honors and advanced placement courses - on those kids who are likely to have the most freedom when they grow up.

Here's why.

I don't know of any law against lending people more money than they can actually pay back. Is there such a law? I'm pretty sure there isn't. As a person of finance you're perfectly free and you're perfectly within your rights to devise all kinds of creative financial products that play on people's worst instincts and greatest vulnerabilities. It's completely legal. There's a whole ethic that protects this right – it's called *caveat emptor* – 'buyer beware.' It's *their* fault if they can't pay it back, even if you knew they couldn't. And the second part of your plan, selling that bad debt to someone else who may or may not understand the full amount of risk involved, is also perfectly within your rights. The same ethic, 'buyer beware,' guides that transaction as well.

Well, it appears that a lot of people have been exercising these freedoms for a long time. Now we have a boatload of worthless securities that most economists agree have to be bought up by the public sector or the worldwide financial system will collapse.

Paul says: "There's a problem with your freedom: when you exercise it without any concern for others it can cause great harm, even when you're completely within your rights. Your freedom needs to be restrained by some sensitivity and some compassion, some concern for the greater good."

You're a savvy political operative. You've acquired a great deal of insight into the American electorate and our political culture. You know things a lot of smart and insightful people know, including this: a lie is the truth if you say it over and over and over again. It works. And you're completely within your rights to act on that knowledge. Plus you know how easily people can be fooled and duped. You're free to fool them and dupe them. You know what scares them, too, and you know how to exploit that

fear. You're completely free to act on that knowledge as well. There's nothing illegal about any of it. The Constitution protects your right to do all of this.

Well, it appears that a lot of people have been exercising these freedoms for a long time. Now we have some of the greatest levels of cynicism ever recorded, and public trust has seldom been lower.

Paul says: "There's a problem with your freedom: when you exercise it without any concern for others it can cause great harm, even when you're completely within your rights. Your freedom needs to be restrained by some sensitivity and some compassion, some concern for the greater good."

Let's face it: the Illinois Lottery is a pretty good set-up for us. It's a good way of raising money from people who can't afford it. It takes the burden off of us. And it's perfectly legal - we're free to do it, as a state. We followed all of the appropriate legal and legislative channels to get it done. And it works. Think about it: we know that a lot of people are desperate; we know that a lot of people aren't capable of comprehending the odds against their winning; and we know that people think God will help them win – that the lottery will be the answer to their prayers for financial health and well-being. Remember caveat emptor? Buyer beware? It applies here too. People aren't forced to play; it's their own fault if they take the bait and waste their money.

Well, it appears that we, as a people, made this choice, out of our freedom. Even though it drives people into the ground.

Paul says: "There's a problem with your freedom: when you exercise it without any concern for others it can cause great harm, even when you're completely within your rights. Your freedom needs to be restrained by some sensitivity and some compassion, some concern for the greater good."

I'm sure you can come up with a few examples of your own...

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I'm probably never going to be elected dictator. I'm off to a slow start. I haven't even won a local election yet. And I probably won't be able to make Paul's writings required reading in high schools and institutions of higher learning. So I guess I'm going to have to find another way to share Paul's alternative vision. I'm guess I'm doing it right now. If the process works well you'll take it out into the world with you and live it out as an example for others. Freedom is a wonderful thing, especially the kind of political and economic freedom that we are blessed to enjoy in the United States. But faith is a wonderful thing, too. It shapes our lives, giving them purpose and meaning. It calls us out of ourselves, and into community, where there are shared obligations and mutual responsibilities. It calls us to sensitivity and compassion and a concern for the greater good. It brings us to a place where freedom can be the gift and the blessing that it was always meant to be. Amen and Amen.