

Epiphany 4, January 28, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church , Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28

The pilgrims' journey we come together each Sunday to share is made up of as many individual, unique journeys as there are individuals in this space right now - more, in fact, because almost all of us are all going to be a part of another's journey, too - perhaps many "others." How we got here, to this moment, is particular to each one of us.

For instance, my wife Rachel, grew up in an agnostic/atheist family, only coming to faith in an encounter with a monastic community when she was 20 She sojourned for a while in the Roman Catholic Church before finding the Episcopal Church. I on the other hand, was involved in an Anglican church from the age of 8, came through the choir and youth group mostly unscathed, and have never *not been* involved with a church community ever since.

This leaves me with a deficit when it comes to folk not like me: I can't imagine what its like *not* to be connected to a faith community. If I don't continually remind myself that not everyone's as lucky as I've been, then I can create a sense of exclusivity in my relationships with anyone who hasn't come down a path link mine.

Another consequence of my particular journey isn't difficult to figure out: I casually possess all the insiders' knowledge; I know (without being aware of it most of the time) the metaphorical "secret handshakes," the insiders' code language. If I don't continually remind myself of the vigilance and care I need to exercise when it comes to the seductive use of this sort of religious 'shorthand' then I end up excluding those who don't possess it.

And, of course, I've had the wonderful opportunity (as I view it, anyway) to pack my head with extensive and diverse scholarly study - of the bible, of trends and movements, of sociological analysis and anthropological interpretation, of history - a broad swathe of contemporary inquiry that I find fascinating and, I hope, valuable. Some of you have been seduced by this temptress! Many of you simply haven't had the time or energy or the desire. If I don't continually remind myself that knowledge and experience are only valuable to others when they're accessible to all, then I end up excluding some of you most of the time, and most of you some of the time!

My journey includes all of this. It reminds me that we're all, to a significant extent, the creatures of our pasts. Do you remember the "Nature vs. Nurture" debate? It was asking whether our behaviors and our identity are dictated by our genes or the way we were raised. I think the truth is that it's not an "either/or" proposition, it's a "both/and." Part of who we are is dictated by genetics; part by the way we were raised and the experiences we've had along the way. We learn as we go along and, as creatures of habit, we learn well by repetition.

And once learned, I think it's true for most of us that our views and behaviors can be difficult to change, even when we're presented with – and claim to embrace – a different reality which requires modified views and different behaviors. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

The passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthian community is trying to address both of these

ways of living – the “proud minds” and the “inflexible beliefs” – by saying that on a basic level they’re they both consequence of an unexamined life.

If we fail to remember how we – through our own individual journeys – came to where we are now, then its just one short step to becoming, through the way we live, stumbling blocks for any others who have reached this place by a different pathway. The danger of valuing our individual knowledge or experience without also marrying them with humility and love in relationship is that they can become destructive for others. And this is a much greater danger, Paul says, than the other group – the one that is inflexible or unreflective about their beliefs.

This other group gets some of Paul’s attention in today’s reading. These are the ones who have not allowed their identity – formed in the past – to be challenged by new and different understandings or experiences of faith in the present. They’re preventing themselves from being changed. That’s what Paul’s talking about when he gets onto the topic of meat sacrificed to pagan gods – “idol meat.” To this group he says: “even though you now believe in the one God, and Jesus his son, you still can’t seem to let go of your old belief that pagan gods are present in this meat.” You’re stuck in an old way of encountering God that prevents a new and richer encounter.

What I find striking in this passage is that while Paul speaks to both groups – the ones who he clearly thinks “get it” about faith, and the ones who he thinks aren’t quite there yet – while he speaks to both groups he actually spends much more energy and time on the first group - the one he thinks “gets it.” In part its teaching, in part its cajoling, in part its an exasperation which says “you really should know better!”

What comes out of this? Well, one thing is a question: which group do you think you’re in? The brainy knowledge group or the inflexible beliefs group? To the first, Paul issues an invitation to seek an open, loving, and humble heart. To the second, the invitation is to have an open, loving, and humble heart(!) It’s only how you get there that’s different.

More broadly, I think Paul chooses to answer the issue of “idol meat” in the way he does – using metaphorical language around food and eating – because in four chapters he’s going to talk about the new community of Jesus as the body of Christ. The way we live – the decisions we make, the behaviors we adopt within this body will bring health or illness to the body as a whole and will have particular impacts on particular parts of the body. Our spiritual “diet” matters. Our behaviors matter. Our values matter in our overall well-being as a community of faith, as the body of Christ.

Paul says that our attentiveness to God enables our lives to speak for God, and this is grounded in listening for God’s guidance in our lives, rather than raising up our personal knowledge, our proud minds” over our “humble hearts,” and also rather than raising up the barrier of our inflexible beliefs over an openness to God’s transforming grace in Jesus Christ.

In the end, we’ll be “judged by our love and care in the context of our faith community and personal relationships.” (Bruce Epperly) We’ll be judged by how we treat others, not how we

view ourselves and our beliefs. And how we do this is dependent on our willingness to be self-reflective, to be open to God's transforming grace, and to be humble - to walk humbly before God.