

RENEWAL THROUGH LIVING
Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 & Mark 1:21-28

This morning we will celebrate Holy Communion. Part of the liturgy that we use for this meal is: “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine.” We refer to what is in the chalice or cup as wine, but what do we actually use? That is right, we use grape juice. Does anyone know why we use grape juice instead of wine? The reason we use grape juice instead of wine is to support those who choose not to drink alcohol. There are people who never drink alcohol because it is a choice they have made. The same holds true for vegetarians or vegans who choose not to eat meat.

For some what we consume or put in our mouths might not seem important. This morning’s scripture talks about eating food sacrificed to idols which may seem like a trivial matter to most of us here this morning. In Paul’s day, this was serious business. To do so was in direct opposition to the Levitical law taught to Paul, Jesus and other faithful followers of God’s law. Food sacrificed to idols was unclean, and many new believers found the practice to be just like committing idolatry. Yet, Paul proclaims a freedom from these laws for those first Christians, almost all of whom were Jewish. Throughout Paul’s writings, he walks a thin line between freedom in Christ and committed living for Christ. That thin line is the same one we walk today when we try to balance the acceptance of God’s grace, given to us through Christ Jesus with the many ethical teachings that are part of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

In today's reading in 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us of the loving reason to follow an ethical path. We follow certain paths of righteous living, not because we have to, maybe not even because we want to, but simply because in doing so we help others grow closer to God. Specific foods do not separate us from God or bring us closer to Christ. Ethical behavior does not bring us to Christ's salvation, but our choices and actions may be healthier for us and may also bring someone else closer to God.

E. Stanley Jones tells of the missionary in the jungle who was lost with nothing around him but bush and a few cleared places. He finally found a small village and asked one of the natives if he could lead him out of the jungle. The native said he could. "All right," the missionary said, "Show me the way." They walked for hours through dense brush hacking their way through unmarked jungle. The missionary began to worry and said, "Are you quite sure this is the way? Where is the path?" The native said, "Bwana, in this place there is no path. I am the path." Our path out of the jungle of this world is God in Christ. We may have some Rabbis, Masters, Fathers, Teachers, and Reverends but we are all like the missionary. We rely not upon people, or maybe what we call the outside package, but we rely on Christ who is our path.

In this morning's gospel, after the man with an unclean spirit tells Jesus, "You are the Holy One of God.", Jesus rebukes him and tells him to "Be silent." In Jesus' world, people expected a favor to be repaid by a favor or a gift by a gift. People of high status often sought to make known their status through honorific titles. Jesus demonstrates behavior that is humble and not self-seeking. Being Christ centered is being other centered.

Loving support is one of the greatest gifts we can give to one another in the Christian community and in the world community. Most of us would readily give that support to a newly recovering alcoholic, so carefully offering nonalcoholic beverages at parties and meals. That same type of attitude can challenge us to avoid littering or misusing the earth's resources so that the tree-huggers in our midst know we respect their yearning to care for Mother Earth. That same attitude is ours when we avoid language or jokes that may be offensive to others. The young person who is just starting out in life and readily shares how to fix others or states that "I will never _____ fill in the blank", doesn't need our dismissive laughter or comments. Our respect and admiration can challenge all of us to let high ethical ideals guide more of our life decisions.

I have shared with you on various occasions that people who visit our home here on Porter Road don't comment about the fact that this must be a city church because it is on land that is technically within the bounds of the city or that this is more like a suburban church due to the golf course and land around us. What people share with me time and again is that when they enter this place there is a warm feeling and a welcoming presence by those that are here. Hopefully what is experienced here is taken out there (point outside). In a world where many young people are taught and are proficient in technology, this new teaching is needed.

In a high school English drama class students were reading the script of Frank Gilroy's "The Subject Was Roses." The reading moved toward the final scene, one in which a young man named Timmy is leaving home and attempting to say farewell to John, his stubborn and unfeeling father.

The readers were dutiful and lifeless. Students glanced at their watches, waiting for the liberation of the bell. A boy and girl in the back of the class exchanged notes. Another boy, bored, looked out the window at the assistant principal making his way toward the building from the parking lot.

Timmy's lines call for him to say to his father that he has had a dream the night before, a dream he has dreamed many times. In the dream he is told that his father is dead, and, when he hears this news, he runs into the streets crying. Someone stops him and asks why he is crying, and he says that he is crying because his father is dead and his father never said he loved him. The boy reading Timmy's part faltered on these lines, his voice took on a strange tone. The boy lifted his eyes from the script and looked directly at the teacher. "My father has never said that either," he whispered.

Suddenly the class was attentive. An electric silence filled the room. All eyes were on the teacher, who motioned for the reading to continue. The boy looked again at the page and hoarsely read the next line:

Timmy: It's true that you never said you love me. But it is also true that I have never said those words to you.

John: I don't know what you are talking about.

Timmy: I say them now ...

John: I don't know what you're talking about.

Timmy: I love you, Pop ... I love you.

The teacher was now standing by the boy, his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. As the teacher held the boy close to him, first one member of the class, then another, spoke quietly and thoughtfully of the difficulty and of the healing power of loving another, even when that love cannot be returned. When the students left the class that day, they left neither bored nor merely informed, but changed. A new teaching?

Loving support is a gift we give to one another in the body. Loving support is one more way we strengthen the ties that bind. Loving support is one more step toward closeness with a stranger or a friend. Ultimately, loving support is a reflection of God's presence in our lives. And with each reflection, we grow closer to God, more loving to our neighbor, and more Christ-centered in our lives. Amen.

This morning we come to share in this table. In the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup, we realize once again, the awesome power of your love for us, O God. The sins of our past rinsed clean, we remember the sacrifice of your Son. All are invited to come and eat ... all who are sincerely penitent and seek the love of God, through Christ the Son. The table is open. No obstacle stands in the way of you who truly search for truth and faith.

