

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
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Trading Power for Love

Today we gather around a communion table, a symbol for a meal Jesus had with his disciples two thousand years ago. But also a new table showing how different kinds of wood are perfectly molded together into a single object. A metaphor for how this church is made up of different kinds of people, but we are all one in Christ Jesus. Three years ago, I helped to inspire this table, preaching about how God invites us to the church, but we splinter it with our disagreements over things like what we eat. Paul was dealing with a congregation in Rome where people were hearing the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew Bible as an instruction booklet, waiting for someone else to fall out of line. Then they pounce, saying, “You see I am more righteous because I eat vegetables, but you are eating unclean meat!” This is using the Bible, not as the Word of God, but as a club to clobber someone over the head. Why are Christians, back then and today, so focused on being right that we forget that the Church can only stay together if we love each other? If we believe the church is something Jesus made, we do not have the right to ruin it. Paul could have chosen sides and made one group the winner. Paul did this over the practice of circumcision, where he argued that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised before becoming Christians. But Paul did not, I believe this is because the church of Rome was fragile or a 50/50 issue. Or, to be more practical for our time, Christian bickering and judgmentalism is a primary cause for people abandoning the institutional church. Why not for the early church too?

More than three years ago, that was my sermon that helped inspire this communion table.

Today I am inspired by the question of power. When I say power, I’m not talking about the ability to lift heavy objects or electricity. Power in human relationships is the ability to get someone else to do what you tell them. It is power when my mother tells me to do the dishes or when I call up a friend to help me move. In Church, it is power that decides what hymns we sing or how we spend our money. I’d like to think that power in the church would be wild as the Holy Spirit, moving between us freely. I’d like to think that we would have enough trust in each other that when someone has a good idea, we come together to affirm that the idea is formed by a heart in the right place. Affirm the mind full of wisdom and creativity. We add spice and help shape ideas with our own wisdom.

I’d like this communion table to stand as an example, I preached a sermon, Jim built this table with the help of others, and offered it to this church. Leadership groups talked about the table as it was being built and saw no reason to stand in the way of Jim’s creativity and hard work. I myself encouraged him to do the work even when it got hard due to his Parkinson's.

Power is easy to share when we trust each other.

But Paul was not dealing with such a simple thing as this beautiful communion table. If we believe that everyone has good ideas and accepts the heartfelt gifts others bring to the community, what happens when someone stands up and says, “That does not belong here?” Then things get difficult. I want to take a moment to thank you all for making my job much easier than Paul’s. I have been able to keep my arms spread open because few have told me to shut them. I have not acted as a king-maker, choosing a winner. But that was the position Paul was in with the church in Rome.

Instead of trusting each other, they judged and condemned.

In Rome, there were two factions, the weak in faith and the strong in faith. Why are they called this? Perhaps because one group had more power to make decisions. But whatever we call them, this group was in an unhealthy conflict, and instead of trying to work on the question of food in a fruitful way, they turned on one another, pointing to the other as the problem. Paul says that people were condemning and judging each other because of what they ate. So how would I try an ease tensions with this kind of dispute today? Today, the trend among more tolerant-minded people is to say let people believe whatever they like, as long as it does not interfere with others practicing their faith. Your freedom to throw your fist stops when it hits my nose. However, this is not exactly what Paul says.

Paul first prioritizes relationships. Both groups need to stop judging and condemning each other. In both groups, you are accountable to God. Both groups, whatever you do, must be rooted in love. Then Paul makes an interesting argument, “nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who considers it unclean.” Unclean is a ritual word; it is not related to sin; it has to do with whether we are physically prepared to get close to God.

It could be as simple as Jewish Christians reading Leviticus, which says the people of God shall not eat pork. Still, Gentile Christians look to the story of Peter and Cornelius, where a tablecloth comes down from heaven, and God tells Peter to eat ritually unclean animals. The issue may be as simple as two groups that each have their own favorite text. But instead, of naming one group as ungodly, Paul says that if this early church is going to last, they’ve got to take into account both Godly and human opinions. In other words, it is not enough to say God is on your side, you’ve got the convince people too.

Paul does not care how perfectly you follow the Bible. If your actions hurt people, you are no longer walking in love. Or, to put it another way, when the resurrected Christ meets Peter on the shore for a post-easter breakfast, Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him. When Peter says yes, Jesus implores him to feed his sheep. To take care of your fellow humans. To prioritize relationships.

Paul does not give us a map about who is right when Christians disagree. Instead, this passage is an account of how Paul tried to ease a conflict between incompatible opinions on food. God only knows how stubborn people can be that God is on their side. Instead, Paul invites people to give up their power for the sake of love. Because this is God's table, it does not belong to me or you.