

Of chocolate and choices
Epiphany5B, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Grace Church Newton
February 4 2024

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The neighborhood I live in with my family is a great neighborhood for Halloween. When the boys were younger, we reveled in the holiday: the costumes, the decorated houses, the festival-like atmosphere of kids frolicking through the neighborhood, and, yes, the candy. I vividly remember the year my son Lukas was three years old. Now, at that age, every time a holiday comes around again, it's as if it's happening for the first time ever. He had no memory of Halloween the year before – how one *does* Halloween. It was brand new all over again. And he was so excited in his Flash superhero costume that his Grandma E had made for him. So as it became dark, we took Lukas and his brothers around the “small block” – not too many houses. This way we could swing back by our house to see how they were doing before we decided to keep going.

Now, if you have ever celebrated Halloween with toddlers, you may have come across this three-year-old trick-or-treat strategy. Lukas would knock on the door. He would hold out his bag for candy, saying thank you. Then before he left the porch, he would unwrap and eat everything he had just received. We probably made it to seven or eight houses before Lukas, in the final stretch toward our house, started shrieking and just melted into the sidewalk. So we scooped him up and carried him home, and put him to bed – probably still in his costume.

Where is this going, you might be asking...It's not Halloween, why is she talking to us about trick-or-treating?

“All things are lawful for me,” wrote Paul in his first letter to the gathering in Corinth – “but not all things are beneficial.” “All things are lawful for me,” Paul continues, “but I will not be dominated by anything” (1 Cor 6:12). Lukas could eat the candy as he received it, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't the most beneficial choice...or the most measured choice.

For these past four Sundays the lectionary has presented to us a series of readings from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The quote I just offered was from three weeks ago. Some parts of these readings are pretty provocative, some are – on first pass – somewhat

inscrutable, all of them beg for a response. Rather than pause each Sunday to react to that week's brief selection from Corinthians, I've waited to gather these four weeks together so we could look at the letter more as a whole.

So, as we do that, let's review a little background information about the *ekklesia*, the assembly of believers in Corinth. Corinth itself was a large, prosperous city with a highly diverse population ethnically, religiously, culturally. It was the capitol city in the Roman province of Achaia, in modern-day Greece. In Corinth – since it was a city – there were likely smaller house gatherings within different parts of the city which would then all come together at times for a shared meal and for worship. So – with Paul far away communicating through messengers and letters and with the fragmentation of the groups of believers in Corinth – we can begin to imagine how there would have been opportunity for different understandings of Paul's teachings to emerge over time. And these differences would likely have played out – might have flared up – as the full congregation gathered together [[Source](#), 1932].

Evidence in the text of the letter itself suggests that this first letter from Paul to the Corinthians was written in response to questions he received from the community, conveyed both by word-of-mouth reports and from a letter [referenced in the text, Cor. 7:1] Paul received from a person or a group of people in Corinth. We don't have that first letter – all that survives is Paul's response. His response – recorded as what we now call 1 Corinthians – indicates there was dissension in the community: power struggles, differences of opinion about appropriate conduct for believers including questions about sexual morality, and concerns about some members of the congregation sidelining the less affluent, more marginalized members [[Source](#), 1932; [Source](#), 254].

So here's Paul, who saw himself as called by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles – to spread the good news of life in Christ beyond the Jewish world. And we see in Corinthians – and across the Pauline writings – Paul's reaction to these challenges of time and distance and the constraints of the written word and the word carried by other human messengers. Across the Christian communities he had founded, Paul went to great lengths to ensure that what he believed to be the life-altering, life-giving message of the good news in Christ. He longed to make sure that that message was coming through. Thus in today's reading we hear Paul describing himself as a world-class marketing expert, if you will – as trying to understand the concerns of different groups of people so he could share the good news in a way that might communicate best with them: “To the Jews I became as a Jew...to those under the law I became as one under the law...to those outside the law I became as one outside the law...to the weak I became weak...I have become all things to all people...I do it all for the sake of the gospel” (9:20-23). He fervently desired to share his experience of life as a follower of Christ.

Now, Paul got some things wrong. In particular, he wrote assuming that the end of time was at hand, so some of his ethical and behavioral guidance doesn't make sense to people who don't expect the world to end in the next days. "[T]he appointed time has grown short," he writes in the selection from two Sundays ago. "[F]rom now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away" [1 Cor 7:29-31]. We would naturally – and rightly – have longer-term concerns.

Even if we discount the apocalyptic framework within which Paul worked, though, the main theme of this letter still shines through. Freedom. Freedom in Christ. *This* is the life-giving message Paul longs to share with the Corinthians and all the other communities of believers he founded around the Mediterranean basin. Yes, Paul may have gone along with the statement he quoted: "All things are lawful for me." In last week's reading, he also agreed with the Corinthians' logic that they might eat or drink whatever they pleased, including food sacrificed to idols, because they were enlightened enough in their knowledge of Christ to understand that idols were ineffectual, so eating sacrificial meat wouldn't mean anything. And yet, freedom in Christ – for Paul – doesn't necessarily look like freedom as the world might have it. Even if something makes sense to one of us as an individual, following our free response to God may mean NOT doing something that might make logical sense to me if it does harm to the community as a whole.

To think back to the example we started with this morning... Within reason, "All things are lawful...but not all things are beneficial," as Lukas might have acknowledged the morning after Halloween if his three-year-old vocabulary could have formulated it that way. "All things are lawful...," but "I am better off if I am not dominated by my desire for chocolate," he might have thought. Even though we *can* do something... even though we think *our logic* is sound, can we learn to think about our *rights* in a different way? Can we grow into Paul's understanding that freedom in Christ is different than freedom as the world describes it? Can we know and remember that in God's economy we as individuals are *most* blessed when we move in a way that the *world* might see as limiting. Instead of seeing God's freedom as a constraint, can we instead come to see it as opening ourselves to God's grace and to the abundant life that is available to us – individually and collectively – in God?

Praying the words of today's collect, "Set us free, O God...and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ" [[Source](#)]. Amen.