

The Strong - 100, The Weak - 0

February 1, 2009

(Epiphany 4 - Year B)

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

I have been interested in a story that has been in the news in the last several weeks.

This news story is about a high school girl's basketball game, a game that was played just 3 weeks ago up in Dallas.

In this basketball game, the Covenant School of Dallas, a Christian private school, played against Dallas Academy.

And the outcome was that the Covenant School won the game, by the score of 100 to 0.

That's right, 100 to 0.

And it was reported that the score was 59 to 0 at halftime.

Dallas Academy, the school that scored zero points, has 20 students in the entire high school, a school that caters to students with special needs and learning difficulties.

And they were beaten by a Christian private school, with a final score of 100 to 0.

After the game, the coach of Covenant School, the coach of the team that scored 100 points in the game, defended his team and the way that they had played.

That coach sent an email out to the media saying that he would not apologize for the game, for he believed that his girls played with honor and integrity.

After his email was distributed, that coach was then quickly fired.

The story of this Texas girl's basketball game, with a 100 point margin of victory, has brought up questions of sportsmanship and competition.

Do we teach our children to let up when we are beating the other team 59 to 0 at halftime?

Do we go easier on the other team when they are not as smart or athletic as we are?

How should we behave when the stronger team is hitting 3-pointers and when the weaker team cannot even sink a single basket?

Because of this basketball game between the Covenant School of Dallas and Dallas Academy, we are asking these questions, questions about how the strong and the weak are to play together on the same court.

And because of a controversy over the eating of meat, the people in the church in Corinth are asking these same questions of the Apostle Paul:

How can the strong and the weak live together in this world?

For in today's reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, the people in the church in Corinth have a question for Paul. Their question is this: are we allowed to eat meat that was once offered to idols?

For you see, in the city of Corinth, it was the custom there for non-Christian people to take animals - and to offer the meat of those animals in the worship of idols.

Yet, as Christians, we do not believe in the worship of idols. Instead, we believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty.

Yet, those who were strong and knowledgeable in their faith in Corinth, went on ahead and *did* eat the brisket and the ribs and the sausage that had previously been sacrificed to idols.

These Corinthians who were strong and knowledgeable in their faith were able to eat this meat - and they were still able to maintain their Christian beliefs, without slipping into idol worship.

However, there was also a group of folks in Corinth with special needs. These folks were the weak - who were *not* strong and knowledgeable. These Corinthians who were weaker, did *not* eat meat that had been offered to idols.

Because if the weak ate this idol meat, then they believed that they would slip into the non-Christian practice of the worship of idols. So the Apostle Paul instructs the Corinthians in today's scripture passage.

And Paul concludes that we should give up the eating of those juicy BBQ pork ribs - if the eating of those ribs would cause a weaker person to slip in their faith.

For Paul instructs us that strength and knowledge puff us up.
But love builds up.

When I was a boy, my Granddad had surgery for a stomach ulcer. After my Granddad got out of the hospital, he was put on an extremely restrictive diet, a diet that was highly regulated and enforced by my Grandma.

Granddad absolutely hated being put on this diet, grumbling and complaining all the time.

Now, my grandparents had a small ranch just outside of the city. It wasn't a ranch as much as it was my Granddad's place to play and tinker around.

And one Saturday, while my Granddad was on this strict, medically-prescribed diet, my Mom took my brother and I out to the ranch to visit my grandparents.

Since it was a hot day, my Mom let us stop at Baskin-Robbins to get ice cream cones.

When we arrived at the ranch, my brother sprang out of the car to greet our grandfather, with his ice cream cone still in hand.

As he jumped out of the car, my brother's scoop of ice cream rolled off the cone.

The scoop of ice cream then lay in the midst of dirt and weeds, and was covered in gravel.

And with one fell swoop, my Granddad scooped up that dirty, grass-stained, vanilla ice cream and popped the whole thing in his mouth.

Grinning like a cat, with melted vanilla running down his cheeks, Granddad grumbled to my brother:

“Boy - don't you even *dare* go tell your grandmother what I just did.”

Without even knowing it, my brother and I had caused my starving, dessert-deprived grandfather to stumble in his post-surgery diet.

For in that one instance, Granddad was one of the weak.
And all it took was a pebble-encrusted ice cream scoop to make the
weak stumble and fall.

In our own lives, we are the strong, who happily lick our ice cream
cones,
While the weak are on a strict diet.
In our own lives, we are the strong, who have the ability to score 100
points on the basketball court,
While the weak never even make a basket.
In our own lives, we are the strong, who eat meat that has been offered
to idols.
While the weak say 'no' to filet mignon, in order to keep their faith
alive.

For many of us are the strong people, who think nothing of walking into
the HEB grocery store and filling our carts with fruits and
vegetables and meats.
Yet the weak are the millions of people in this country who go to bed
hungry each night.
So we should lay down our advantage - and skip a meal every now and
then - and give the money saved on that meal to the hungry and the
weak.
All so that the weak will not stumble and fall.

Many of us are the strong people, who have high school diplomas and
college degrees and post-graduate credentials.
Yet the weak are the millions of illiterate people in this country who are
not able to read.
So we should lay down our advantage - and volunteer in our local
schools.
All so that the weak will not stumble and fall.

Most of us in this church today could be considered as the strong people
in this life.
Yet, the Apostle Paul instructs us to lay down our advantage.
The Apostle Paul instructs us to give up our food and our money and our
strength and our knowledge.

For food and money and strength and knowledge puffs up.
But love builds up.

It is now halftime in the game of life.
And our team is ahead, 59 to zero.

How will you finish the game?

AMEN.

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