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Eating At The Idols

Texts: 1Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1: 21-28; Audre Lorde: *Genuine Change*

In seminary they used to tell us that not everyone is going to be changed by every sermon, but every sermon is going to change someone because it's going to change you, the preacher. The message of your sermon is the one that you need to hear, and you're letting other people listen in as you preach it to yourself. You just have to hope that the message is one they need to hear as well.

For most of my life I'm sorry to say that I have either ignored Black History Month, or nodded to it from across the room, like someone I should know, but whose name I've forgotten. I have been more likely to wonder why there was a Black History Month at all, rather than to wonder why there were 11 White History Months. But the events of last summer have brought me up short and made me start to see things in a different way. So this year, I'm going to try to do something different. I'm going to try to dig deeper into the power that Black American Christians draw from the Scriptures for understanding their story, their history.

But Black History Month comes in February, and this isn't February yet, so we're going to start our journey with a kind of prologue, and it has to do with idols. In our text from Corinthians today, we have Paul discussing the then critical question of eating meat sacrificed to idols. Now, this is not a critical question for us today, but the solution to it can open our eyes. In the ancient world, there were idols everywhere. Think of all the Greek and Roman gods there were around: Jupiter, Mars, Athena, Zeus, Aphrodite, Hera, the Mother goddess, and on and on. There were temples to these gods everywhere, and sacrifices. The temples were places of social gathering where festivals were held and the food served included meat that had been sacrificed to the idol of the temple. Some temples also had markets attached to the back where they sold the extra meat they had from all the sacrificial offerings to the gods. You could hardly take part in the social life of ancient Corinth without hanging out in a temple at some time and eating meat sacrificed to idols there. You could hardly buy cheap meat if you didn't buy it out back of one of the temples. So this was about taking part in the socio-economic life of the city as much as anything.

Now, some people in the Corinthian church were convinced that eating this meat was perfectly fine. They knew, or so they claimed, that the other gods and their idols were really nothing at all. "There's only one real God, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus," they said, "so if someone is delusional enough to sacrifice meat to a meaningless idol of Zeus, say, why shouldn't I eat it at the temple festival or buy it cheaply out the back of the temple?" Sacrificing the meat to an idol of a god that didn't exist was no different than sacrificing meat to a ladder or a door: it couldn't hurt the meat or hurt you to eat it at all. So they went ahead and ate it.

On the other hand, there were those who saw things differently. The temples, the idols, the old gods, those are the things that they were fleeing from in their old life. They represented the old times and the old ways that they had given up. Now they had a new faith, and a new life, and new ways of being in Christ. Faithfulness to that new way of being meant giving up the old way of being. If they were living today, they would be the people who would tell you, now that you've given up drinking and drugs, that it's a bad idea to hang around the bars and street corners you used to love. They will suck you back in. No, if you've given up the old faith, the old way of thinking and being, then really give it up. Don't hang on to the symbols and the practices of the old way, or you're going to find yourself right back into it. The old gods may not be real, but they still have power to draw you back in if you keep doing all the old things you used to do. Sure, you have to be a part of a society that thinks this way, but you don't have to join in.

The underlying debate, then, is this: what is the meaning of living in a society with these idols all around? Everyone accepts that Christians have to reject idols as objects of worship. No one thinks it's okay to bow down to the idols, or to confess allegiance to the gods they stand for. That's over for them now that they are followers of Christ. No, the debate is subtler. Given that none of us believes in these idols as representing something real, is it okay to be involved in the practices of the idols as bystanders, or do we have to make an effort to show that we reject them?

Paul's answer is nuanced. His sympathy seems to lie initially with the people who think it's okay to join in: of course idols are nothing, there are no other gods, so go ahead and use the freedom you have in Christ to socialize in the temples and to buy cheap meat. You know the truth of your allegiance, you know what you believe, so what's the harm? Go ahead and participate. But then he comes back to the principle at the heart of Christian faith, the principle of love. Maybe it's okay for you, maybe you know what you believe, but if someone else sees you there, a Christian sister or brother, how can they know what you believe? Maybe idol worship is a harder thing for them; maybe it affects them differently. Maybe seeing you there makes them think you really do believe in the idols and their gods. Perhaps they will think that you support that other way of being. That could hurt their faith. That could hurt their confidence in you as a brother or sister in Christ. They could think that you are mixed up in the worship of the temples, and not just in the social life. That could hurt their faith, draw them into the old way of living, and lead to despair. In fact, it could make them give up faith in Christ altogether. We can't let that happen, Paul says, and if necessary, I'll never eat meat again, just so no brother or sister in Christ is hurt by my actions.

So now we have the eating-meat-sacrificed-to-idols question all sorted out: for the sake of other sisters and brothers in Christ, who might be hurt by seeing us seemingly joining in the worship of one of the idols of our society, we must refrain from it. We must refrain from doing things that make us look like we support those idols, even if we know in our hearts that we

don't support them, even if we don't think those idols are very powerful, even if we think those practices are ultimately meaningless. We must refrain because, for other brothers and sisters in Christ, those idols have a different meaning. Their experience of them is different. The idols have worked differently in their lives, have had a different power over them than they have had over us. We do this out of love for them, as part of the family of God in Christ.

So now you might be saying to yourself, "Great, we've solved an ancient problem, but what does that mean for us?" Aha! That is a good question. No, we don't have temple meat and temple markets around us. But we do have idols. We have things that ask for our allegiance when we shouldn't give it. We have beliefs that ask for our assent, even though they are contrary to our faith in God and Christ. We might experience them as not real, or not powerful, not worthy of taking a stand against. But other brothers and sisters in Christ do find them powerful, and real, and are looking to us to declare them unchristian. They are looking to us to come out against these idols. Others of our sisters and brothers may have fallen back into worshipping these idols instead of following Christ. We must win them back.

One of the idols of our society is clearly that being white puts us one up on people of other races. The story is that white people have accomplished everything worthwhile and must continue to be in control of society or it will all fall to pieces. That's a belief that asks for our allegiance, that is as present in our society as idols to the gods were present in ancient Corinth. Our society functions as if that's true, and many people believe it is true. One Black president and people feel they are losing their country. Non-white immigrants coming in and people feel like America is losing its greatness. Whiteness as America's greatness is an idol of our time. It calls for our assent, and we must not give it.

The evidence of centering whiteness in our society is all around us: our history highlights white accomplishment, whites expanding across a barren land and bringing civilization to the empty continent. We fight against the unenlightened natives who don't want to be civilized and who keep attacking us when we just want to live peacefully. We believe this even as the maps show us expanding into more and more territory that belonged to Native Americans and taking it from them by force. It's the same with Black people. We get no sense that the people who were enslaved were fully realized human beings. Back in Africa, they were bakers and bankers, they were builders and poets, they were dancers and storytellers, farmers and potters, when their villages were attacked and they were captured and enslaved. Our history telling doesn't capture their full humanity, because if it did, the horror of what we've done to them would shock us.

Black people have been in the United States since almost the beginning. By now we all know that the first enslaved Blacks arrived in America in 1619. Think about that a minute. Blacks were here just 12 years after Jamestown, the first permanent white settlement in North America, was founded in 1607. They were here one year *before* the Pilgrims arrived on the Mayflower in 1620! Black people have been contributing to the building of this nation since

before there was a nation, from the very beginning, but so often they have been written out of the story. They are portrayed as mere passive vessels of white accomplishment.

It's not just history that shows the power of the idol of whiteness at the center of everything good. Our police treat white people differently than they treat Black people. The videos have shown that. When whites get mistreated by police, we actually have some of us on tape yelling, "You're treating me like a Black person, not a white!" Whiteness and white superiority are idols of our society. Like the Corinthians of old, we might think that it's not real and not true, that we know better than to believe that. We might think that that's about what others believe, that there's no reality to this idol, it doesn't affect us. But it's the atmosphere we breathe, the environment we grow up in. It does affect us, and it affects our Black brothers and sisters in Christ in powerful ways. It's important that we see how it might be affecting them, and that we act in love to turn away from any involvement with such idols. It's important for us to see the power that these idols still have in our society, and one way we can do that is by telling our story from a different perspective.

That's why Black History Month is important for us as Christians. It's a way of breaking away from the greatest idols of our society. By centering Black people and their experiences, their contributions to our society, we can become aware of how our behavior might be hurting others. We can begin to feel the power still left in one of the old idols. White centrality is our meat-sacrificed-to-idols question: how much can we participate in some of the practices of our society before we are caught up in idolatry? How much must we deny any sign of allegiance to a belief which we as Christians have been called to reject? How can we show love to Black brothers and sisters in Christ who are affected by its power far more than we have been?

Acting in love for the sake of others was a challenge to the ancient Corinthian church, and it's our challenge today. I'm sure we are up to it, and we will figure out how to show love to our Black brothers and sisters in Christ through our choices, just as Paul helped the Corinthian church to do so long ago. That's one reason why I'm changing my ways. I'm going to make Black History Month a special time. I'm determined to be different on the other side of it. You can listen in on the messages I'll be telling myself these next four weeks as I examine how Black history can enlighten our understanding of some of our Scriptures. God's Word is a message to all humanity, and each of us brings our own insight and understanding from our experiences. By bringing forth a Black understanding and experience, I hope we will have new insights and new power from God's Word. I hope the messages will be helpful to you in your life, too. I hope you will go on this journey with me as I change who I am by looking at the Scriptures through different eyes. May God give us success in our undertakings. Amen