**January 28, 2018**

**Mark 1:21-28; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

I am a lover of Emily Post and all things etiquette. The minutia of socially acceptable behavior is fascinating: why we need 3 forks at the table for certain meals, and why gentlemen should pull out chairs for ladies, and how many days you have to write a thank you note. Did you know that people started saying “Bless you” to someone who sneezed all the way back in the 6th century – Pope Gregory actually commanded people to bless others instead of fearing that the sneezers had the plague. And it’s still the polite thing to do. Mind you, I’m not able to follow through with all the guidelines, but I enjoy learning about the what’s and why’s of it all.

Etiquette gives guidance on polite, respectful behavior for everyday encounters. For the most part, etiquette is common sense, but it does not translate in cross-cultural situations. American etiquette is quite different from Ethiopian etiquette which is quite different from Korean etiquette.

That was the issue here for the Corinthians. Multiple cultures were living in the same area, trying to figure out what to do with one another. Some people worshipped idols by bringing offerings of food to their gods. After the food was dedicated to the idols, it was eaten by people. The food didn’t go to waste. Christians watched this, and maybe were offered the food themselves, which was causing a ruckus in the community. Some thought that those who ate the food were sinning big time by polluting their bodies, questioning their loyalty to the one true Triune God, and simply by interacting with something intended for another god. Paul stepped into the debate here to chastise them all; those gods didn’t exist, so it didn’t matter if anyone ate that food. “We are no worse off if we do not eat it, and no better off if we do.” Ultimately, it didn’t matter what someone believed about the food; Paul thought that if eating the food caused another Christian’s faith to waver, then the food should be avoided. It’s not about the food, it’s not about the theology, it’s about relationships. If what they ate had a negative affect on the community, it should be avoided. The whole point is that what we do affects our community. Good Christian living – good etiquette – should respect the people in our community enough to avoid doing things that make their life unpleasant or difficult cause a crisis of faith.

It makes sense, but it’s not fun. This passage calls us to self-awareness and self-restraint. We don’t like to limit ourselves. We might like that other person, but their problems are their problems, right? Not your circus, not your monkeys. Except in the case of community – real community – their problems, their troubles, their burdens actually are our problems.

In the community of marriage, partners choose to limit their behavior to make the other’s life easier. It is gladly and easily done in the early days; it becomes more of a conscious choice and a commitment as a marriage grows older. More than being tidy or doing the chores, we care for one another by not doing things that are a stumbling block or difficulty for the other. Our love imposes limitations. For example, if some glamorous and handsome celebrity came to my office asking for pastoral care, I could pray with him, but I could not accept his invitation to give him more personal pastoral care over a weekend in the Bahamas. This would upset Adam and strain the community that we have. It’s good etiquette for me to uphold our community and remain faithful to Adam, but it is also a part of our marital covenant. It’s part of how we promised to care for one another. My love for my husband limits my relationships with other people.

My love for Huck imposes *different* limitations on my life. I haven’t worked as many late hours this last year, so that I could feed him before bed, and hold him when he was awake. There are certainly moments when it’s inconvenient to do what he wants or needs. Just this last week he turned off the computer while I was typing pages, deleting some things and causing a restart and rewrite – but the limitations of love call me back to him and to the needs he has here and now. Work can wait. Fitness can wait. Huck can’t wait. He’s too little. So for now, to prevent any crisis of care or our mother-baby community, I put other things to the side in order to love on him.

As Paul said later in the 13th chapter of this letter, "Love does not insist on its own way." And so while we acknowledge the importance of knowledge and of freedom to take care of our own needs, we also acknowledge that our love for one another is what must determine our behavior. We are not free to only meet our own needs, or to be thoughtless of others in any given situation. We actually go out of our way to take in to account those affected by our actions. We thoughtfully avoid those things which might cause a crisis or division within our community. The health of the body of Christ – the church – takes priority over our knowledge and our freedom. These are the limitations imposed by love.

Such limitations do not mean that we avoid conflict. In fact, Paul insisted that the church was exactly the place for difficult discussions. Paul simply urges that every member of the community be taken seriously, for knowledge does not belong to any one segment of the church. Good, intelligent, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ will interpret Scripture differently. Therefore, we must listen to one another, *really* listen, not in order to correct one another but in order to learn from one another.

Our differences are not because some are stupid and some are smart, not because some are virtuous and others are wicked; rather, life experiences cause each of us to see and hear and interpret Scripture slightly different from one another. At some point, it does not even matter who is right and who is wrong, because Christ has called us to live together as the church. Therefore, dialogue becomes our protection against self-righteousness. For without the ministry of our opponents, we can easily become proud and pretentious, cutting ourselves off from the work of grace by judging our faith and practice to be so correct that we do not think we need grace. Knowledge has the power to convince us that being right is of the highest value. Yet, Paul warns the church in Corinth “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Scripture calls us to hold our convictions but always with humility. It is more important to be loving than to be right. These are the limitations imposed by love.

After celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation last fall, there is some desire to strut proudly as a Protestant and point to the momentous community of faith that formed from Martin Luther’s early dialogues. Sometimes this leads to “us” versus “them” language – Protestant versus Catholic, or Presbyterian versus Pentecostal, or other such encampments. We are quick to lift up the way that we say the Lord’s Prayer as opposed to the way *they* do. Clergy may point to various doctrine, puffing up with pontifical statements about history and scripture and such. As we do these things, we forget that we are really part of the same. Part of the one holy catholic church, one God and Father, one Lord, one baptism, one faith.

So it was good for us to join the Lutherans and St. Elizabeth’s Roman Catholic congregation last Sunday afternoon. It was an opportunity for each of us to practice good Christian etiquette, holding more loosely the things which we claim to be “right” or the “best” way, and making space for others to be and do in their own way. There were several ways that I stood out amongst the other clergy – I wore my black robe (they wore white), I used a different version of the Lord’s Prayer than they did, I didn’t bow at the altar when we processed, and, of course, I am female. More than a dozen of St. Elizabeth’s congregation came to me after worship saying something about my gender. I forgot that having a female worship leader was not the normal (or acceptable) way of being there. Yet despite their common practice, they went out of their way to extend the invitation for me to join them in their home, with their people, in their space. At least for the day, they set aside the things they *knew* in order to build up the body of Christ.

We need to commit ourselves to the love that builds up. Paul calls us to recognize when the limitations imposed by love take away the weight of being right. Surely, Paul's words to the church in Corinth continue to speak to us today, calling us to step forward, to recognize the limitations imposed by love, and to play a reconciling role in our families and in our church family. Surely, Paul's words to the church in Corinth continue to lift up for us the importance of our commitment to the body of Christ, the church. This does not mean we hold back on our differences, but, rather, that we see our diversity as God's gift to us, a guard against self-righteousness, and a reminder that God's ways are not our ways. We need one another in order to more fully discern the will of God.

Paul calls us to welcome and accept those with differing points of view in ways that honor and reflect the Lord's welcome and acceptance of each one of us. So may we continue to live within the limitations imposed by love in our homes and in God's house and may we be blessed with a continuance of God's love that is big enough to hold all the pain in the world.

Thanks be to God for such a love in Jesus Christ, the One who is the head of the church. Amen.