

Being the Epiphany

January 31, 2021

Psalms 111

¹ Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. ² Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. ³ Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. ⁴ He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. ⁵ He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. ⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. ⁸ They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. ⁹ He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. ¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

1st Corinthians 8: 1-13

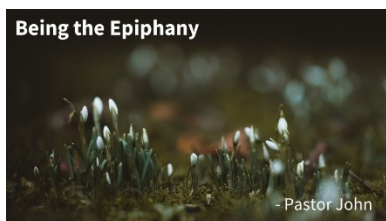
¹ Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.

⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." ⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as in fact there are many

gods and many lords — ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ "Food will not bring us close to God." we are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹² But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.



Good morning! Today we continue in our "Created Anew" worship series as we look at "Being the Epiphany". Epiphany is not a word we use very often.

Epiphany is the season in which we celebrate the revelation of God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. It comes right after Christmas, the season in which we celebrate Jesus' birth. This year it comes right before Lent, which begins in mid-February. In the worship series we are focusing in on God's creativity in our

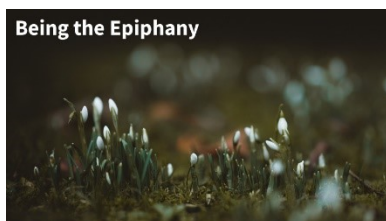
relationship with God and on his creativity in our relationships with others. During the first three weeks of this series we have honed in on our role in the building up of the body of Christ and about how God has called and wants to transform us into who we were created to be in Christ. Today as we explore what it looks like to “be the epiphany” let us begin with a word of prayer...

As I begin this morning, focused on talking about how we are to live out our faith in the body of Christ and in the world – how we are the epiphany – we must acknowledge that these are not normal times. One cannot just pop over to a friend’s home or drop by to check in on a neighbor like we used to. Inviting folks into our homes or accepting invites to friend’s homes both have a new risk-assessment level to it. We might plan our trips to the grocery store during certain times, for example, when the store is less crowded. We may decide to go to a store another day if we arrive and the parking lot seems a bit too full. All of “this” creates new challenges to staying connected to our friends and neighbors.



Because of these COVID times and these new realities, it is sometimes difficult to be aware of the places of need and of the issues that people are struggling with. Here, within the church, it feels like we are still pretty well connected with each other. This becomes a little less true as we extend the idea of connectedness out to those of us who are worshipping as an online congregation. And when we move outside of that online circle, out into the world, then the degree of connection decreases even more.

So as we consider the call to be the epiphany in the lives of others and as we begin to lean into our Lenten study in the near future, we must be cognizant that we do so in a new and unique time.



Turning now to Psalm 111, we find words of encouragement as the psalmist reminds us of why we need to stay connected to God and to one another.

These words are even more applicable during these unprecedented times. The Psalm begins to help us see why we need to be the epiphany in this time and place. Our Psalm for today begins with these words:

"Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation". Even in these times, and maybe even

"Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation".

- Psalm 111: 1

more so in these times, we must praise the Lord our God. As we gather to worship, we find opportunity to remind each other of God's great works. One example would be the testimony that Steve shared last Sunday from the Seattle mission trip. The psalmist also reminds us how *"the Lord is gracious and merciful"* in the many ways that God provides for his people. God is gracious and merciful because he is mindful of his covenant to always be our God. Because God is a covenant-keeper, he is faithful, just, and trustworthy in all of his ways.

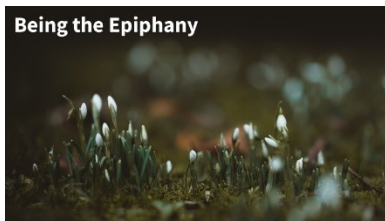
Continuing into verse nine, the psalmist declares that *"God sent redemption to his people"*. This redemption came in the form of Jesus, the one who embodies the extension of God's covenant *"forever"*.

"God sent redemption to his people".

- Psalm 111: 9



Yes, in being reminded of this truth, we too can join the psalmist in declaring: *"holy and awesome is his name"*! Our Psalm for today closes by reminding us that the fear of Lord is beginning of wisdom – not of knowledge, but of wisdom. The psalmist reminds us that all who fear the Lord gain a *"good understanding"*. Both wisdom and a good understanding of God were needed in the church in Corinth. Turn with me to 1st Corinthians, chapter eight, as we continue into the New Testament as we grapple with how to be the epiphany in our world today.



The Corinthian church was a church that had its share of struggles. Two weeks ago, we looked at their struggles with living faithfully in the world and within the culture that was all around them. I referred to their struggles with certain cultural practices and norms then and that idea is again the focus of today's passage. In today's passage the general idea that Paul is talking about is what it means to be a part of the body of Christ as well as about how distractions can pull us away from being the body of Christ. Today's passage focuses is on the distraction caused by eating (or not eating) food sacrificed to idols.

In the city of Corinth, idols were very common. Most of the population of the city regularly worshipped and sacrificed to wide variety of idols. In that culture, religious and social and political life were bound up in one. All were connected together, one affected and impacted the other. So, it was inevitable that new converts would face the question of eating food sacrificed to an idol.

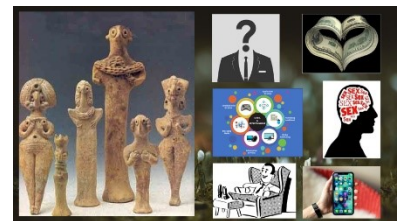


To avoid idolatry in all forms would demand an uncompromising devotion that the greater culture did not understand and would disparage as anti-social behavior. Occasions for eating in connection with an idol or at an idol's temple were numerous. The challenge lay in at least two key areas. Almost all ceremonies – weddings, funerals, banquets, childbirths, birthdays, election celebrations – were celebrated at one of the many pagan temples. If a Christian were to have any social or civic life at all, being present at these functions would be expected. Because these functions were in the temples, religious activities would always be a part of these gatherings. To avoid all encounters with idols or food sacrificed to idols would have required very strict practices by those following Christ. One would have to decline all social invitations.

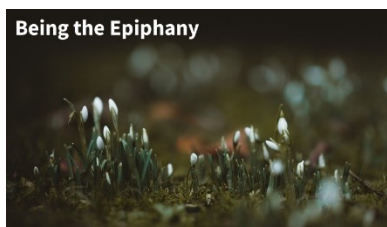
Adding a layer of difficulty to this was the common practice of bringing home the "leftovers" from food sacrificed to an idol. As was the practice in many of the Jewish sacrifices, the priest only kept a small portion of the animal being sacrificed. The remainder belonged to the person who brought the offering. This portion would be brought home and would become part of the individual's or the family's regular diet. When invited into the home of a non-believer, there was always a question concerning the source of the food. Christians had friends, neighbors, business associates, and even family members who were devoted to idols, who worshipped other gods. They would be placed in awkward situations when they were invited into the homes of these people. To deny all of these invitations – those at the temples and those in people's homes – would come at a great cost to the Christian.

Two thousand years later, the faithful face similar circumstances and challenges to our faith. Today our culture has many idols. We may not worship them in the way that the pagan culture around the Corinthian church worshipped their idols, but as followers of Jesus Christ, we too may have to count the cost as well if we are to remain true to our faith. Just as those Corinthian Christians with hopes for social and economic and perhaps civic advancement struggled with whether or not to participate in the culture and society of the day, many Christians today face the same struggle. Although just a small example, when I first started teaching at Dakota Middle School, a few of the “cool” teachers decided to join a golf course and to golf together a couple of days a week during the summer. I wanted to fit in, to belong. So, I joined and was a part of that group for the summer. By the time the summer drew to a close, I decided that I could not continue down that path if my faith were to be the priority that I claimed it to be.

Other than popularity, what are the idols or false gods that people struggle with today? A quick google search revealed this list of the top six idols we worship today: identity, money/possessions, entertainment, sex, comfort, and our phones. Identity includes our social media presence, our job or title, our abilities or skills, our achievements. Money and possessions have always been high on the list of things that societies idolize. The pursuit of these temporal treasures is non-ending and is never satisfying. As a nation, we want to be entertained. When we begin to chase after the latest greatest feeling or experience, we have gone down the wrong path, again pursuing a temporal pleasure. We live in a culture that is obsessed with sex. This article argued that today *"Our sexual identity, sexual practices, and sex lives are sacred to us"*.



We live in the day of factories, automation, and products to accomplish this, that, and the other thing. We have come to enjoy our comfort and to overvalue our time. And lastly, we idolize our phones. I do not believe much needs to be said concerning our obsession with our phones. We hardly go anywhere or do anything without our constant companion being right there with us. Taken as a whole, these idols or false gods can make it a challenge to live and work and play in the world without becoming influenced by or consumed by these worldly pursuits. It does not take much to see how or why we can get distracted from our faith as we allow these things to reign on the throne of our hearts.

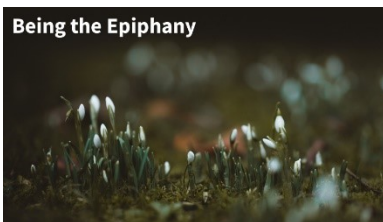


In our passage from 1st Corinthians 8, Paul focuses on what we do to one another, on how we treat ourselves and others, and on the reality that how we treat one another matters. In our passage, the mature believers' knowledge about the meaningless of idols was creating a "stumbling block" for those new to the faith. In verses five and six Paul acknowledges the issue of idols, stating, *"in fact there are many gods and many lords — yet for us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord, Jesus Christ"*. The mature believers know this truth and seek to live by it. They knew that these idols were meaningless, that they were not real. To them it did not matter if one ate food offered first to something that did not really exist. But their knowledge was "puffing" them up, separating themselves from those that they saw as weak or immature. In verse seven, Paul goes on to acknowledge this reality: *"Some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled"*. The new believers were having difficulty separating their past understandings from their present reality.

The division and conflict surrounding these foods was harming the church and the relationships between the believers. Instead of continuing to allow this issue to divide them, Paul calls for loving choices, especially from the more mature believers. Paul knew that love would build up the relationships between the believers and that love would benefit the body of believers as a whole. Put into today's language, using a metaphor common in the world of sports, the reality that Paul was trying to drive home was that there is no "I" in "team". It is "we", the "team" that together forms the body of Christ.



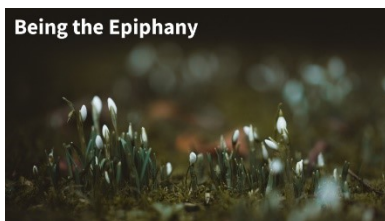
Today we strive to live out the idea of the community of faith – we are not only created to be in relationship with God but also to be in relationship with each other. When one part of the body suffers, we do so together. When a member has a struggle or a difficulty or an illness, we rally around one another, offering support and encouragement and resources. For me, this idea of community is both wonderful and daunting – it is great to be surrounded by the community of faith in a time of loss, for example, but not so great to be surrounded by the community of faith, for example, when you are struggling with an addiction or a hard personal relationship. This line must, of course, be walked in love.



Love is essential, because when the community offers words of "support" that do not feel like support, it can be harmful. Such was the case in the church in Corinth concerning the issue of food that was offered to idols. To illustrate, a story. When I was leading a grief group in Winner, the group was very quiet the first

few sessions. Conversation was there but it was at a minimum. When we got to the lesson that discussed things that people say to you in a time of loss, it was like we were instantly best friends. The group quickly bonded over their shared, hurtful, harmful experiences. When wanting to support or encourage people dealing with a struggle or issue, our inadvertent superiority, arrogance, or insensitivity can cause harm instead of bringing healing.

In Corinth, eating meat sacrificed to idols in front of those who still had a connection to those idols, to that world, was causing a stumbling block to those folks new to the faith. In addressing those that were eating this food regardless of how it affected others, Paul calls it what it was – a sin to knowingly do so. In terms of our Methodist tradition, it would be violating the “do no harm” clause. Paul called upon those mature in the faith to offer grace and respect instead, to be considerate about the choices they were making that were harming other’s faith. Returning to the team idea, Paul was saying, “There is no ‘I’ in church”! But there is a “you” and what you do can negatively affect other believers. The “you” can also make a positive difference in the life of the church and in the lives of other believers. That is what Paul is calling us to today.



Sometimes when we are lost or are hurting or are struggling, it takes another member of the community of faith being an epiphany to us, to be the one who brings revelation, to be the one that helps us to begin to see our way out of that situation. Last week I spoke of how my experiences at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission and at the Hope Center transformed my hard heart. Those I met and got

to know were epiphanies to me – they showed me Christ, revealed in and through them. For some who heard my story last week, sharing my experience may have drawn them into a place of reflection or introspection concerning their relationship with those in need or those struggling with something. Empathy was felt, I pray that love began to grow.

God's creativity seeks to use each of us, each with our unique set of gifts and talents and experiences in life to connect to one another, to carry one another's burdens when needed, to hold one another accountable when needed. Again, we are called to do so in love – not in haughty knowledge or with condemning words, but in love! My friends, we live in a broken world – people have all sorts of idols and all sorts of ways to deal with their pain and loneliness and struggles. We were each created in God's image to reveal God's presence in new, different, and creative ways. Just as we are called to be the epiphany to others, God continues to reveal himself more and more to each of us during this season of Epiphany. As we go forth, may we go forth committed to making a positive difference, to being a voice of love in the world. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider your role at Grace, where might you be an epiphany to others? Where might God use you to be love in this place?
- 2) *Pray*. Where is the Spirit working in you concerning your “knowledge” (or lack thereof) of your faith? How might the Spirit be leading you?
- 3) *Study*. Take a few minutes to read Mark 1: 29-34. What is Jesus’ focus in this passage? How can you be more about this “work” this week?