

Guarding the Weak, Strengthening the Strong 4 Epiphany B

Christians are on spiritual paths of growth that vary in degree. Since we are to be all of one spirit and one faith, the body of Christ is called upon to help when weaker members need the strength of stronger ones. That is the task of a living church. That is a healthy response of a thriving faith community.

From the beginning of time man has tried to avoid the responsibility of caring for one another. When God asked Cain where Abel was, his response was “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And we all know how God felt about that.

It was because of this great concern for the health and welfare of Christians and churches that the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in today’s lesson. Paul wrote with authority that “no idol in the world really exists” and “there is no God but one” whom Christians worship. Nevertheless, it was his responsibility as an overseer and teacher that Christians learn and obey what Christ taught. There were also matters outside the gospels where Paul gave guidance as well. I am glad he did.

Paul was given wisdom and authority by God to guide the church in its infancy. He knew the scriptures and he was careful to teach in accordance with them. His writing to the Corinthians has a basic concern that Christians should act like Christians toward one another. There was a mindfulness and caring aspect for those weak in the Christian faith.

Eating meat offered to idols was offending some Christians that had come out of pagan religion. This was meat offered in a pagan temple and was perceived as supporting pagan practice and causing some to fall from their new faith. With these Christians in mind, Paul suggests, then don’t eat the meat!

Some churches have taken Paul’s teaching on caring for weak Christians very seriously. Their understanding of the underlying principle is to guard the conscience of one another. During communion for example these churches will not offer wine, but grape juice. They do so in order to avoid any influence, social or religious, from the effect of alcohol on individual lives and society. These churches also try to be helpful to those who are in a recovery program.

Our tradition is different due to its interpretation of scripture, tradition and reason. We leave it to individual conscience. Scripture does not advocate abstinence for everyone but moderation in regard to wine. We believe adults can take responsibility for these matters, and one may abstain from the chalice in receiving the sacrament at any time, yet be considered to be fully communed.

Knowledge is a wonderful gift, but it too can become idolized if not applied wisely. Again his teaching would allow the strong to participate in eating meat offered to idols but there is a mandate to guard the faith of the weak.

In our Religions of the World class on Tuesdays we have gained a new respect for Christian and non-Christian faiths that are different from our church. Knowledge in this case can lead to tolerance and mutual understanding. It does not mean however that a church becomes a hodge-podge of everyone else’s beliefs so that individuals

lose their own identity as Christians or lose a sense of their particular tradition. This is the reason small group learning is crucial, so questions may be asked and clarification given. Such classes can build up the church and bring light to those in the Christian faith.

The second scripture lesson teaches me that my Christian freedom is secondary to the building up of the church's faithful. Checking in with someone you don't know well is one way to build each other up and not just your close friends. Another way could be encouraging someone dealing with illness or a college student or a person that has lost a job. Another example of this principle: Ignoring the Spirit's leading to facilitate and help those who are struggling in worship with the prayer book. We print a few complete service bulletins that you can give to someone new on Sundays.

What opportunities can forge new strength in one another this year? Can we use them to gain new knowledge about God's will for our lives? Are there challenges that may impede faith?

Challenges to Christianity as a whole today is one of my concerns. Society seeks to bend the rules of what is acceptable behavior and it weakens people's faith. To my disbelief, I learned this week that marijuana is legal in certain counties of our country despite federal law. You can move your family to one of the most idyllic places to live in the US and have 25 marijuana plants for home use. If you guessed Mendocino County, California and you want this drug for medicinal and recreational use then go see a realtor as soon as possible. There is employment waiting for you! And while the marijuana crop provides up to seventy per cent of the income for the county, there is a heavy price to pay.

The sheriff and others are calling their county "the wild, wild West." Residents are protecting themselves with firearms. One family interviewed by the CNBC network airing Saturday, January 24, 2009, had had enough and was moving their daughters and themselves, when the home next door was set on fire after it was robbed of its multitude of plants. Similar crimes of arson, robbery, violence and murder were reported on the program. Processed marijuana is being shipped across the country damaging others' lives.

Where was the church in this matter? Not one was interviewed. Guarding the faith of the weak and strengthening the strong would be a tough mission in that kind of environment. Besides their safety, what has this done to the moral fabric of families living in this area? Such freedom has a price not only for life and limb but also for eternity.

Could this happen in South Central Wisconsin? I can only imagine if plant bearing drugs were permitted to be grown in greenhouses for medicinal use. I would hope churches would contact legislators if this happened in Dane and Rock Counties. I assure you, I would be one of those church leaders to go on public record in this matter, especially when youth drug use is rampant. The sanctity of life is our business as Christians and our denomination teaches this. The apostle Paul urges us to make the strong in faith stronger and guard the faith of the weak. The story of one county in

California might seem far fetched in Wisconsin, yet a desperate economy can lead to desperate people.

Where else do we see the message of caring for one another's faith? In the catechism page 855, one of the duties of the bishop as apostle, chief priest and pastor of a diocese is "to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the whole church." My job description as priest is on the next page. One of those is: "... to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church...." It is of grave importance that I take the sharing of the bishop's role seriously as I endeavor to keep the vows I took at ordination. Each year at the renewal of ordination vows, I recommit myself to God, to our Church and bishop, and to you.

I am mindful of Paul's charge to Timothy (2 Tim.2:15): "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth." As we come to another Annual Meeting I ask your prayers that I may continue with Jesus' authority to preach and teach the gospel, make the strong stronger and guard the faith of the weak. I will with God's help. Amen.