

As we prepare today for our annual meeting we do have to address the fact that there is an issue that is dividing this parish.

Paul speaks directly to the divisions in his church in Corinth when he addresses the problem of their day, the people who eat food sacrificed to idols, and those who do not. What Paul says to the congregation is what we should heed too. When we think of this great divide among us, we should remember that knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

I'm talking, of course, about those here who are Giants fans and those who are Patriots fans in the upcoming Super Bowl match-up. This could get ugly at the annual meeting and in the week ahead, but I want us all to remember that we are Christians. Yes, by the end of the game next Sunday some of us will be winners and some of us will be losers. Some of us will feel vindicated and quite superior to all the rest knowing that they had been right about their team all along. But being right isn't as important as being kind and respectful of our fellow parishioners.

OK, so this is all tongue in cheek, but having a light-hearted division here at church allows us to draw a parallel with other more serious topics. The same principle applies that Paul uses to encourage the Corinthians. What is important is that we remember that winning the argument counts for nothing in God's Kingdom, and being a loving and faithful Christian counts for everything.

Some people in Corinth understood that through faith in Jesus the Old Law was superseded by Jesus. People were free to live without worries of what foods they could eat, and when they needed to wash. Paul tells them, "Take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak." Just like Jesus had preached, we have the freedom to act as we choose, but it should be in the Spirit of the Law. Paul is pejorative when he calls the ones who still cling to old laws weak. It is not ours to judge that. Paul means both ones who follow the now outdated food laws of the Hebrew Scripture of the traditions of the Greek culture. But the message is clear enough, "When you sin against members of your family, you sin against Christ."

In my continuing comments about the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous we come to steps 6 and 7 this week. We've talked about having to admit defeat, and our own powerlessness – a counter-intuitive, and counter-cultural idea. I've told you about how instead we have to find our power through the one who has all power, the God of our understanding. Then last week we took on steps 4 and 5 where we make an inventory of our defects of character, and then gather up the courage to tell God and another human being.

That brings us to Step 6 – Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of Character and Step 7 – humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

So, we've got our list of shortcomings, prepared with as much willingness and honesty as we can muster. We've faced another human being and told them all this stuff (usually a sponsor, or a clergy person, or in some cases a complete stranger). Now what do we do? Many of our failings fall into the general categories of pride, greed lust, anger, gluttony, envy or sloth. Does that list sound familiar?

Yes, it is the old Seven Deadly Sins. What were problems for humans back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when first categorized are still problems for us today. And now, in step 6 and 7 we ask God to take these defects from us. Can God remove defects? And how does that happen?

Well, anyone who has thoroughly worked this program will tell you that God does remove defects of character. How it happens is patiently, with deliberate effort, much prayer and willingness to ask for help to change. Anyone who with humility and sincerity prays for release of a particular self-identified fault will tell you that God can, and will do it. Again, it depends upon our willingness. In step 7 we take the action of asking God to take these things from us. It is with humility that we can accomplish it. These steps are for individuals to take, but they require the help of others, especially others who are going through the same sort of thing together. People join together to work on a common problem because they have suffered in similar ways.

In Jesus' day people suffered from addictions and mental illness just as today. We don't know what sort of specific ailment tormented the man in our Gospel story today, but two things stand out for me in this story: First, this man came to the synagogue. To me that shows that he had a degree of willingness to want to pray to have his affliction relieved. And second, the man was accepted into the group. They didn't shun that man with the unclean spirit. Maybe

they prayed with him, supported him and his family, but at the very least, they included him in their congregation.

Jesus came to the synagogue that Sabbath to teach and people were impressed by his teaching. This congregation also welcomed the guest preacher, and listened to him with first respect, and then amazement. He opened the scriptures to them, and spoke in a way that enlightened and inspired. They felt the authority of his words.

Jesus healed this man with the unclean spirit, and that gives us hope that we can be healed too. This is also a story of faithful community, like our faithful community. We lift each other up, we work together for others who are less fortunate, we praise God together in the beauty of our music and the ancient prayers of our tradition, and we support each other when we are down. We share the Holy Sacrament together in the way that Jesus taught us.

We also, once a year, take stock of our church and our mission. I hope you have taken time to read the reports of each head of committee. Much has been accomplished this year, and much time and effort has gone into reporting and compiling the annual reports. They make clear our commitment, our generosity, and our trust in Jesus Christ to show us the way.

There is always room for improvement. We are imperfect, of course. We haven't had all our character defects lifted out of us as individuals, or as a parish. But I think that this is a glimpse of what discipleship is supposed to be. We commit ourselves to Christ and we trust that the Spirit will guide us. This is a glimpse of what fishing for people is about. We commit and we trust. This is a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven is meant to be.