

Before I read from 1 Corinthians I want to tell a joke. Not just any joke but one of questionable taste. Or at least as questionable and still tellable in a sermon!

A priest, a pastor and a rabbi walk into a bar to share a drink and talk shop. Someone makes the comment that preaching to people isn't really all that hard. After a few rounds, one thing leads to another and they decide to do an experiment. They will all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it.

The next day back in the bar, the priest and the pastor show up but not the rabbi. The priest is all bandaged up and is on crutches while the pastor is in a wheel chair with an arm and both legs in casts. Just as those two are about to share their stories the bartender says, "Are you supposed to meet with a rabbi? If you are he's down in room 314 at the Hospital." They thank the man and head right over to the hospital.

They go into the room and the rabbi is laid out with a leg in traction, and one of those halo devices on his head and several IV's running to both arms. The rabbi looks up and nods and weakly says, "So, who's first?" Father Flannery adjusts his crutches and says, (Using my best Irish accent) "When I found my bear, I read to him from the Catechism. Well, that bear just started slapping me around and knocked me to the ground. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him, and Blessed Holy Mother of Jesus, he became as gentle a lamb. The bishop is coming out next week to give him first communion and confirmation."

Reverend Billy spoke next from his wheelchair and said, (Using my best fire and brimstone voice) "Well brothers, I went out into the woods and found me a barr. The first thing I did was read to him from God's Holy Word! But that barr wanted nothing to do with me and started to run off. So I took hold of him and we began to wrassle. We wrassled up hill and down until we came to the banks of the river. Seeing the opportunity God had provided to me I quick dunked him, for there is no sprinkling with us, and I baptized his hairy hide and beastly soul in the Name of Jesus! And just like you said, Father, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus and singing gospel hymns, his favorite was the one about the bear, Gladly, the Cross-eyed bear!!! Well, before I left I signed him up for New Members class."

They both looked down at Rabbi Goldstein who was in pretty bad shape and in a great deal of pain lying in his hospital bed. The rabbi sighed, pushed the button on his pain pump and reflected, (Using my best Yiddish accent) "Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start."

I told you! I want to cross as many lines as I comfortably could in worship. So, what part of the joke made you cringe the most? Religious leaders in a bar? Drinking? Clergy bragging and holding a preaching contest? Religious stereotypes? A punch line about circumcision? All of the above?!

Now, let's hear from Paul. (Read 1 Corinthians 8.1-13)

You see Paul was writing to this church about yet another questionable or gray area that these believers found themselves in. This time it was about eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. Paul begins by stating the main argument which is so evident that it is almost elementary, too simple to be pointed out let alone effective! We all have knowledge – but knowledge puffs up while love builds up. It is easy to claim knowledge but it is more important to remember that we are known and claimed first by God.

Then Paul tells them what he knows and how he is secure in that knowledge – namely that it doesn't bother him to eat meat that has been offered to made-up fake idols. Then Paul demonstrates true knowledge. He says that even though I know this and you may know this what about someone who does not? Someone who is not as secure in their faith and beliefs? Someone who very well may find that eating such meat is a serious offense or would cause serious doubts? The answer, says Paul, is simple. Don't eat it.

Now this was not the only gray area that Paul found himself dealing with. This one is relatively easy – remember the circumcision debate? Then there was the whole thing about being called to bring the Good News to the Gentiles! And what about Jesus – did he ever struggle with any gray areas?

Well, today's story from Mark hints at one, healing on the Sabbath, even though he is not called out for it in this reading he will be. What are some other gray areas Jesus dealt with? Radical forgiveness, eating on the Sabbath, appropriate dealings with women/the unclean/Samaritans, and economic/social inequalities – just to name a few. A biggie was religious legalism - calling into question the practices and teachings the religious officials had deemed proper. It would be a shorter list to name what things Jesus dealt with that weren't gray areas!

Both Paul and Jesus, to me, seem to be equipping us to be able to deal with the gray areas in life without having to fall back on the easy answers of “Everybody knows that!” which represents the easy answer of knowledge and “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!” which represents the easy answer of religious legalism where everything is black and white.

Both Jesus and Paul seem, to me, to be saying that true faith in God brings the ability to be able to make the necessary decisions and take the necessary actions that will demonstrate to others the awesomeness of God! But it takes thoughtful consideration of others and faithful demonstration to others of the things we hear and see from the bible and others with mature faith.

I end with an anonymous quote. “A life that is wrapped up in itself makes a very small package.” I would add that a life wrapped up in itself denies the gray areas.