

## ***Handle with Care***

She was the most ethereal creature I had ever seen. It was as if she had floated down from heaven and continued to float barely above the surface of the earth. When I saw her dance in person, I decided right then and there that I wanted to be just like the prima ballerina Maria Tall Chief. A few days later, my mother bought me an album of *Swan Lake* and I began to dance my heart out to that music. I was only four years old.

I was already taking ballet lessons, but my class was much too young to go “on point.” We learned the basic positions and simple ballet steps in soft kid ballet slippers. Once I saw Maria Tall Chief, however, the little pink slippers would never again satisfy me. Thereafter I wanted to be all the way up on the very tips of my toes, in pink satin **toe** shoes. Under the careful eye of my ballet teacher, that was not going to happen for at least four years.

The following summer while visiting my cousins Nancy and Betty, I discovered a pair of Nancy’s old toe shoes in her closet that looked about my size. Nancy and Betty were both already ballerinas. They were also older than I: Nancy by six years and Betty by four. In the face of my begging, they helped me put on the

shoes, which is a ritual unto itself.

How awkward the shoes felt. Not light and airy at all. In fact, I ***clunked*** when I walked. Nancy and Betty helped me pull up on point at the practice bar in their room. That felt even more unnatural than clunking around. They then put on ***their*** toe shoes, turned on some music, and pulled me out into the room to dance with them. That was when my aunt stuck her head into the room and shrieked. I do not remember what she said after the shriek, but it had to do with ruining my feet, and Nancy and Betty were in trouble.

In today's text, some of the Corinthians found themselves suddenly in trouble. Word had gotten back to their beloved founder, Paul, that all was not well in the fledgling church in Corinth. Although the faith of the established members was deep and abiding, their spiritual ***pride*** was getting in the way when it came to nurturing those new to the faith.

Specifically, some of the long-standing members were evidently secure enough in their theology, to attend banquets thrown in honor of idols, where the main course was the meat sacrificed to

the idols. They could do this and eat the meat, too, because they understood full well that such gods were non-existent and so the sacrifices to them were meaningless.

When questioned about their participation in such affairs, the strong Christians self-righteously used their knowledge of Christ as a defense for their freedom to go anywhere and eat anything they pleased. As long as they knew Christ, what was the harm? Paul had previously been their champion in saying they no longer had to abide by the strict dietary laws of Judaism – Paul had long asserted that the way to God was ***not*** through the stomach. And so I suspect these folk were not overly anxious when they heard that a letter of complaint about their eating habits had been sent to Paul. By the same token, I suspect they ***were*** surprised when they received his reply.

Paul first acknowledges that their understanding about food offered to idols is correct. It means nothing. He further reiterates that dietary observances, in and of themselves, really have no bearing on our relationship with God. But then he says that they ***do*** affect our relationship to our brothers and sisters in the faith, particularly those whose faith is not yet mature. In other words, if

we do something that confuses their understanding of the faith, then simply by our **influence**, we can damage their spiritual growth. And damaging the faith of new believers is not a loving thing to do, no matter how “right” our reasoning may be.

Therefore, as disciples of Christ, our personal behavior is dictated not by knowledge, freedom, or even the Law, but by love, **selfless** love that builds others **up**.

Furthermore, Paul says it is **our** responsibility to go the extra distance to make sure our brothers and sisters in the faith are not misled by anything we do. It is not up to **them** to figure it out, because they may not have yet reached a level of understanding and spiritual maturity to properly sort it out on their own. That means if we’re considering doing something, indulging in some past time, that might cause a brother or sister to waiver, or even to question the verity of the faith, then we do not do it. Period.

In this day and time, the dietary issues no longer exist. But that does not necessarily cancel the point of this lesson. Our society is still filled with people of immature faith, scripturally illiterate, and unchurched. Today in the United States, the numeric correlations between the church and unchurched are really not all that

different from those of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinth. And as an aside may I point out that this is not the fault of those who are yet to be reached or still new to the faith, but rather the church's fault.

l

Two weeks ago at the annual officers' retreat, members of the session personally committed ourselves to become intentional about our own spiritual growth. This is a first step in becoming better spiritual servants of those who have elected us to serve. As a group we recognize that much of our witness to Christ is a silent witness, carried on by how we act and what we do day in and day out. In our goal-setting we tried to remain open to ideas of new ways to spiritually strengthen New Hope.

To grow spiritually as a congregation, we concluded that we must first be in relationship with one another, and we cannot be in relationship unless we really know one another. To that end, I am excited to report that beginning next Sunday, we are implementing monthly pot-luck dinners on the first Sunday of each month, because one of the best ways to get to know someone is to share a meal. Incidentally, there is biblical warrant for that throughout scripture. These dinners will not have any agenda other than sharing a meal and getting to know one another. No one needs to

be a member to come and eat. The food doesn't have to be fancy and there doesn't need to be a program.

In an age of 2-3 thousand member mega-churches, New Hope holds the distinction of being a ***family*** of faith. There are lots of folk not yet with us, who want and need such a family. They need everything we offer in the way of Christian fellowship, nurturing, and development. One-by-precious-one they ***are*** joining our family. Some may be new not only to our congregation, but to ***any*** congregation.

So what has any of that got to do with Paul's discussion from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century about eating meat sacrificed to idols?

l

Immature faith is similar to immature feet. Remember my story about the toe shoes? Neither of my cousins had been allowed to go on point until they were eight years old. It was a matter of physical maturity, because some of the bones of the feet remain tender cartilage until then. And mere cartilage cannot support the feet sufficiently to withstand the stress placed on them when a person balances her entire weight on the tips of her toes. Cartilage cannot withstand that without sustaining damage,

sometimes serious damage, no matter how protectively stiff and rigid the toe shoes may be.

I don't know if my cousins were aware of the potential physical dangers or not. But they ***did*** know that four year olds are not allowed to go on point. Furthermore, ***I*** wasn't going to question their judgment. I was getting to do what I wanted. Besides, I figured they knew what they were doing. After all, they were older than I; they were full-fledged ballerinas.

When God brings the unchurched into New Hope, we all become older brothers and sisters to babes in the faith. Such tender faith is like the tender cartilage of a child's feet: malleable, impressionable, which means ultimately that young faith is vulnerable. Vulnerable to misinformation, to confusion, not to mention doubts and misgivings. New faith will not yet be strong enough to hold up under the weight of sorting through and balancing ambiguous information – or behavior that seems to challenge the most simple understanding of the faith.

As ludicrous as it may sound, some folk new to faith consider ***us*** the experts – you and me. After all, we have been Christians for

longer than they, and consequently, they look to us for guidance. They also watch us and listen to us, many times when we are completely unaware.

That is scary. It is an awesome responsibility. It is also a tremendous honor and opportunity to have God entrust us with the nurture and shaping of new believers; to entrust us with the future of this family of faith known as New Hope. Like my cousins, who despite a four-year-old's perception, were not mature, none of us have reached full maturity in our faith development. But the good news is that with God's help, we will be able to fulfill this awesome responsibility, as long as we handle tender young faith with care. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev. Belinda C. Windham, D.Min.

January 29, 2012