Today’s passage from 1st Corinthians is one of my favorites because of the distinction it draws between what is right and what it loving. To explain how it does this we need to take a moment and go through a bit of the passage’s background. It opens with the phrase, “Now concerning food sacrificed to idols.” I assume sacrificing food to idols is something none of you are very familiar with and if you are I think it probably means I have not been doing a very good job. But let’s talk about that idol sacrifice for a minute. The days in which Paul was writing there was a high probability that any meat you consumed had been sacrificed in some sort of pagan ritual. It would sort of be like if we went to Sentry and in addition to the label telling us how much our brisket cost and weighed it also informed us that it had been sacrificed to Neptune on Friday. If you were going to eat, purchase or have meat at a friend’s house it was likely that your meat had started its journey in some sort of ritual at a pagan temple. And, of course, it wasn’t that those running the temple had some sort of side job as a butcher. No, the sacrificing of animals and the worship of pagan deities were intertwined. And so, when Paul says he is going to address the question of food sacrificed to idols he is talking about most of the meat that would have been available at the time. And the question is whether, in eating a Whopper sacrificed to Minerva, you are actually participating in the worship of Minerva or at least giving tacit approval to that act. Put another way, were you running after false gods if you ate meat sacrificed to them? And this is where Paul gives two very different answers. One of them says it is okay to do and the other says it is not.

First in answering the question whether or not eating meat that has been sacrificed to an idol is a form of worship he is very emphatic that it is not. He says, “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.’” The argument basically is that pagan gods are not real, so the meat sacrificed to them is not tainted by some sort of pagan god juju. Meaning that in eating meat sacrificed to idols you are not ingesting pagan-ness because their gods do not actually exist. A pagan priest who offers sacrifice is more akin to a butcher with some wacky ideas. The wacky ideas do not infiltrate the meat. So, a T-bone that started as a sacrifice to Venus has exactly the same supernatural qualities as one that was not sacrificed to anyone, which is to say none. And this is the right answer. We do not believe that there are such things as pagan gods so whatever rituals people want to perform to them amounts to little more than kabuki theater.

But then there is another answer from St. Paul. After he has explained the right answer he says, “But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” What he is saying in this sentence is the loving answer and serves as a caveat to being right. He is acknowledging that there are two groups among those who are asking the question. The first are those who know food sacrificed to idols is nothing and never give it a second thought. The second group however are the ones unable to see these sacrifices as harmless. That is, they are unable to distinguish between eating food sacrificed to idols and the actual worship of an idol. And because of this they cannot have a normal relationship with this type of food. To them it seems like they are worshiping a false god and this inhibits them in the worshiping the one true God. This may not be the best example but think of it like this. Let’s say you know someone who has a chronic gambling problem. Because of this problem they cannot really be in the presence of gambling because it exerts a type of control over their minds which distracts them from all other things. So here is a question: Would it be good for them to go to the diocesan convention in May at the Ho-Chunk Gaming Wisconsin Dells? That is, would they be able to focus on the business at hand if they saw a baccarat table shing like an oasis in the desert? For a person with a gambling problem, the casino would be a stumbling block. And because of this they may not have the strength or ability to focus on God when there is a chance that they might be lucky. With my mediocre example out of the way I want to point out something about this second response from Paul. Notice why he recommends it. It is so certain Christians can fully live into their faith.

I started this sermon by saying that there are two answers given by Paul. The first is the right one and the second is the loving one. The word love gets bandied about a lot and often is used in one of two incorrect ways. The first way is using the term as nothing more than a synonym for really liking something. When we say we love ice cream or chimichangas we are probably just saying that we really like these things. The other way love gets used is as a way to get what we want. Kids will tell us that if we loved them, we would let them get a motorcycle or a statue of David Hasselhoff. But that use of love is just our wills and desires spray painted with a nice word. Loving someone is not simply really liking them or always giving them everything they want. Rather, as Paul describes it, love comes in the service of something greater and that something greater is God. Paul is worried that eating food sacrificed to idols may distract or inhibit others from worshiping and obeying the God of the universe. This is why he puts very little stock in technically being right because in technically being right we might cause someone to lose their faith. Being right is less important than being a Christian. When Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment he answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” That is what is the most important thing and anything that gets in the way of that is inherently of lessor importance.

And I think it might do the church a lot of good to reclaim this understanding of love. A love that is focused on the most important thing. I think too often today what passes for love is a sort of vague niceness which does not ask too much of anyone. But notice the love Paul calls for; it asks something of the person giving it. Those who know that food sacrificed to idols means nothing are being asked to give up not just a tasty meal but also being right. And giving up being right may be the hardest thing of all. They are being asked to stop doing something so that they might give space to those who may be weaker, who may be unable to make such intellectual distinctions. Real love tends to cost us something. Much of what we see in the world today is opposite of this. Those who feel they are right demand that others change to be in line with their perfect will. But as Christians we must remember that there is something higher to which we answer. In concluding Paul says, “when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.” Setting aside our strength in the service of others is love and is the call that God puts on our lives so that we may bring all within His saving embrace and be His this day and forevermore.