

"A Vegetarian Controversy?"
Salado United Methodist Church
Preaching Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
31 January 2021

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**"I was a vegetarian until I started leaning toward the sunlight"
(Rita Rudner).**

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Some New Testament moral issues seem terribly irrelevant today. These ethical topics do not seemingly impact our burning modern church problems. Even talk about these issues looks like a deflecting tactic. Why deal with inconsequential sin as Rome burns? Eating food linked to pagan cultic worship looks like a trivial matter easily avoided—until we recognize that we can learn much about dealing with church conflict, about honest differences we have as Christians, and the dire matter of individualism versus community. Hear our text, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13:

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. [2] Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; [3] but anyone who loves God is known by him.

[4] 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." [5] Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords--[6] yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

[7] It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. [8] "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. [9] But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. [10] For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? [11] So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. [12] But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. [13] Therefore, if

food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall (1 Corinthians 8:1-13).

What is going on in Paul's response to the Corinthian problem? In a nutshell, this problem is that in the ancient world people regularly slaughtered animals and offered parts of them as sacrifices to pagan gods at pagan shrines. Yet, the animal's sacrificed portion was often one percent of the animal. So, the 99% remainder went to a local meat market. Some in Corinth saw no problem with buying, and then eating, the "tainted meat." Hunger for the ancients was always a dread. Yet, some held that food sacrificed to idols slighted God. Plainly there was a great deal of uproar in Corinth over this issue and the Corinthian church appealed to Paul for a verdict.

Paul's answer is surprising when we grasp that in the early church the eating of meat sacrificed to idols was a pressing issue. After conflicts over Cornelius, and establishing who was a Christian and who was not, the early church leaders compromised. Acts 15 tells us, "The apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas . . . with the following letter:

The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. [24] Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, [25] we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, [26] who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. [27] We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. [28] For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: [29] that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:22-29).

Note the Jewish Christians give in on most points with few exceptions. Meat "sacrificed to idols" is the most glaring exception to their concessions. Not only in Acts do the writers of scripture forbid "the eating of meat sacrificed to idols," but also in Revelation 2:14, 20 the Heavenly Christ chastises Pergamum and Thyatira. Thus, it was an early church issue. Only Paul goes against the grain of other New Testament teachings. He clearly writes of this issue of sacrificed meat, "Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." For Paul this is a non-issue.

Since idols are nothing, then food sacrificed to them is of no account. Don't worry about it, eat what you want and know that you do not violate God's ordinances.

Yet, just as quickly as Paul offers a green light on all food, he adds something else. Paul writes: "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." He cautions against action that troubles new believers. Paul understands that although things may be legal, they may not help. Eating meat sacrificed to idols may be lawful, but will it be helpful? Why does Paul write this? I pose three ideas as to why Paul teaches this doctrine to the church at Corinth.

1) Within the Christian community, love takes priority over individual freedoms. Paul understands that Christ has come to free people from the religious law. The law of Christ is love. This is what Paul means when he asked believers to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to idols. Our actions should not cause weaker/immature Christians to stumble. Paul writes, "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." We forego our freedom in order to encourage other believers. We decline license out of love.

2) For Paul, Christian health is a priority. Love builds up (v. 1). Whatever else motivates Christians, love is vital. God builds the church on Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection. So, our motive for everything holy is the health/wholeness of the total Body of Christ—the church.

3) 1 Corinthians 8 asks that we take every person seriously (even those without "knowledge"). These are those "for whom Christ died." Our actions reflect a caring concern for members of the church. I remember when a young woman visited Graham's Eastside Church of Christ. She was anxious because they had no musical instruments. She offered to help raise money so that their church could buy a piano. Plainly, she did not know what others knew. Yet, she surely represents a new wave of believers that churches need to reach. We need to teach the neophytes, rather than ridicule them.

I celebrated a wedding once in Burleson, Texas. During the service an amateur photographer fumbled toward the front. She blurted during the wedding, "This fence thing is in the way." She spoke of the communion rail. When I later talked to her, I realized that she had no church experience. She had no idea about chapel furniture. So, I took a little time to explain the significance of the communion rail and Holy Communion. I guess Paul's words got to me.

Our task is to spread Christ's love to the world. It is not to impose a second tier of Mosaic Law on an unknowing public that we want to convert to Christ. We all have our work to do here. You might ask yourself, "How can I help others mature in the faith that gives me life and gives it to me abundantly?" Amen.

David Neil Mosser, SUMC, Salado, Texas 76571