

Meat and Potatoes 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 | 1/29/2012

Today I want to talk about a serious problem that many of us wrestle with on a daily basis. And that is – should we, as Christians, eat meat that has been offered to idols?

Well, maybe not so tough a decision for us. But for the apostle Paul, meat is: *A stumbling block*. He tells the Christians of Corinth, "I will never eat meat," not because he's a vegetarian, or a member of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) but because he does not want to cause his fellow Christians to *stumble* over the issue of food *that has been sacrificed to idols* (1 Corinthians 8:13).

If Paul had been living in Europe in the 1500s, he might have had a meat and potato problem. Up to then, hardly anyone in Europe had even seen a potato, much less eaten one, until Spanish explorers brought them back from South America. And Europeans did not have an appetite for the tuber, at least not initially. Since God had not mentioned spuds in the Bible, clergy preached that the vegetable was the Devil's handiwork. Can you imagine such a sermon today, condemning the satanic influence of potato salad?

People were also frightened by the outward appearance of the gnarly vegetable. Since it looked like a leper's hand, rumors began to spread that potatoes caused leprosy, kind of like the mythical link between toads and warts.

No doubt the apostle Paul, if he had been alive in the 1500s, would have figured out that there was nothing really sinister about a tuber. But since some people saw it as demonic, he might have passed on a fully loaded baked potato. "If food is a cause of their falling," he would argue, "I will never eat potatoes".

Fortunately, the potato problem was solved in the 1700s. During a series of failed harvests, many favorite crops died -- except the potato. People set aside their superstitions and began to embrace the tuber, using it in a variety of ways. Today, potatoes provide people with food security around the earth. The United Nations got so excited about the potential for root vegetables in developing countries that it named 2008 "The Year of the Potato."

From the Devil's handiwork to a major food source in just 500 years. Which brings us to our text, which is all about potatoes.

Okay, so it's about meat. But "meat-and-potatoes" -- there's a connection. There's nothing more personal than our food choices, whether we believe that potatoes are devilish or delicious, or whether we think of meat as a terrible act of murder or as a tasty main course. But personal choices are never completely personal. They always have an impact on the community, which is why Paul makes a connection between food and the health of the church. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he uses the question of eating meat as a springboard for discussing how Christians should treat one another.

The apostle begins with a clear statement of his belief that love is more important than knowledge. He immediately undermines anyone who feels that he has superior knowledge on the question of whether a Christian should eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," insists Paul, clearly expressing a preference for the power of love, which builds up the body of Christ (8:1). He goes on to say that love is the key to having a relationship with God because "anyone who loves God is known by him" (v. 3). Paul wants everyone in Corinth to be a member of PETH -- People for the Ethical Treatment of *Humans*.

So exactly what is happening in Corinth that is causing such a food fight? The tradition in Greece was to sacrifice an animal to a pagan god, burn some of the flesh on the altar, and then eat the rest of the meat in a festive meal. Kind of like a worship service followed by a barbecue.

But that's not all. The remainder of the sacrificial animal was then sold to the meat market, and merchants would turn around and sell it to the public. For most residents of Corinth, this was no problem. But for Christians who did not worship pagan gods, there was serious discomfort about eating a top sirloin that had been sacrificed to idols, especially since many believed that the meat offered to idols could convey some of the power of the pagan "god" to the one who ate it. And unfortunately, these rump roasts popped up all over the place: In the market, in the homes of non-Christian neighbors, and in public festivals that were important places to make personal, political and business connections. So what were the Christians of Corinth to do? They didn't want to eat food that was considered to be the devil's handiwork, but they also didn't want to live in isolation from the larger world.

Paul reminds them that no idol in the world really exists, and there's no God but the one Lord God (v. 4). Paul admits that there may be "*so-called* gods in heaven or on earth," but for the Christian community "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" (vv. 5-6).

God is the source of all that exists, even meat sacrificed to idols. Jesus is the Lord through whom all things exist, even problematic potatoes. Since God created everything and called it good, no food should be off limits to us. Problem solved, right? Wrong!

Remember, Paul is more concerned about Christian behavior than he is about the status of idol meat. He knows that since some Christians "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" (v. 7). Even though Paul knows that idols are figments of the pagan imagination, he also realizes that some Christians are going to get "sick to their stomachs" if they eat idol meat, or if they see their fellow Christians eating such food. He warns cheeseburger Christians to "take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (v. 9).

For Paul, the challenge for the Christian community is to be a part of PETH. This means doing nothing that is going to cause a brother or sister to stumble. It warns against using knowledge in a way that destroys "weak believers" (v. 11). It reminds you that when you "sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (v. 12).

In conclusion, Paul says that "if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall" (v. 13). Cutting meat out of his diet is the way that Paul shows that he values love over knowledge. His decision shows that he is a card-carrying member of PETH.

And how about us? What are the choices that show that we care more about the nourishment of our neighbors than about indulging our own appetites? Let's define the behavior -- including eating -- that really nourishes the Body of Christ. How can we be loving, gracious and supportive of those whose scruples differ from our own?

Jesus is going to offer final judgment, not any one of us. The Lord did not make us judge and jury of whether the potato is the devil's handiwork or whether it is ever appropriate to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols. But Jesus did say that "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Loving behavior begins with *a decision not to be "puffed up with knowledge"*. In a Bible study or small group discussion, refrain from being the person who feels compelled to offer the insight that is the most theologically astute, biblically pure or emotionally gripping. And in particular, don't tell people they are stupid and wrong! It's not your job to correct them. The life of the church is not about how smart you are; it's about God and neighbor. Offer only those thoughts that are going to nourish your neighbor and build up the body of Christ.

Then make *the choice never to be obnoxious*. Although you may enjoy a good filet mignon, don't go out of your way to annoy a vegan by saying, "I love animals. They're delicious." In the life of the church, we're going to encounter a wide range of people who have positions different from our own on politics, parenting, marriage, money management, nutrition, recreation, education, vocation and human sexuality. Talk with them, respect them, and learn from them. Don't provoke them.

Finally, when you come together with your fellow Christians, remember that *everyone is a sinner for whom Christ died -- including yourself* (8:11). Jesus didn't simply give up eating meat; he gave up his infinitely precious life. So when you look around, think of what you can sacrifice for others, in harmony with the sacrifice of Christ. Give up your preference in music, so that others can hear the music that feeds their spirit. Walk away from an activity that makes you comfortable, and take on the challenge of working with children, the poor or the disabled. Sacrifice the pleasure of chatting with friends after worship, and give your attention to a first-time guest.

As disciples of Christ, we should all be charter members of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Humans. We show our membership by loving one another, and not doing anything to cause another person to get sick over questions about meat - or potatoes.

Pastor Keith

Children's Sermon

Blow up a balloon, and ask the children to tell you how strong it is. Ask if a tiny pin can destroy it, and then puncture the balloon with the pin. Then build up a stack of blocks, and ask if a pin can knock down the blocks. Poke the blocks with the pin, and show that the blocks remain strong. Explain that knowledge is like a balloon, which "puffs up" and looks beautiful, but is easily destroyed; stress that a person might learn something this week that is proven to be wrong next week (1 Corinthians 8:1). Then say that love is very different -- it is like a stack of blocks that "builds up" and remains strong and steady for a long time (v. 1). Ask if they would rather spend time with a person who is super-smart or super-loving, and have them explain why. Admit that knowledge is important, but that most of us are more impressed by love that can last for a long time and help us face difficult situations. Encourage the children to use their knowledge in their schoolwork, but to remember that love is what builds up good and lasting relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, classmates and fellow members of the church.