

The Day Paul Became a Vegetarian
I Corinthians 8:1-13

Sometimes we need simply to thank God that the Church in Corinth was so dysfunctional, because it was their problems that led Paul to write first and second Corinthians. For in these letters we find practical wisdom in how a congregation is supposed to live.

Now we know Paul preached that in Jesus Christ we are set free from the constraints of the law. We are set free to follow our own conscience, as our conscience is informed by the spirit of Christ. But what do we do when our freedom, using our freedom, hurts another one's journey of faith?

Here's the situation in Corinth. It was a congregation with many people who were not very wealthy. And in those days the only way most could ever get meat was to go to and to receive meat that had been sacrificed to the idols. Now incidentally, by the time we get to the book of Revelation, eating food sacrificed at the pagan Temple was a definite no – no.

But, in Paul's day, the question was more open. And here was the argument: as believers in Christ we know that the pagan gods have no power, we know that idols do not really exist, because there is only one true God. Therefore, as a strong Christian, I should be able to eat food

from the pagan Temple, because after all it is just food.

And, in a culture in which most people scrambled to find enough calories to survive from one day to the next, we can understand this point of view. In fact, Paul concedes that these folks are correct: strictly speaking eating food sacrificed at a pagan temple does not harm our Christian walk, because in Jesus Christ we have been set free.

Now, the stakes (not steaks) were even higher, for many folks used the dining rooms attached to Temples for birthday parties and other social gatherings. There were no other such rooms available to most people. . . so to give up meat was also to give up on some wonderful social opportunities as well.

But then Paul zeroes in on the deeper point: to live in Christ is ultimately not to live for ourselves, but for the sake of others. And you can tell Paul is irritated with those who have made the argument for eating pagan temple food. He says, yes yes you are correct I know all that, but then he says you know sometimes knowledge puffs up. That's not a compliment. He says you are so sure of yourself, that you find a way to eat pagan food.

And if you have a strong faith so that such does not bother you, then good for you. But folks, what about those who are not as strong in the faith? Knowledge might allow you to eat food

sacrificed to idols, but love does not. Knowledge can puff us up, make us feel superior to those who do not know as much about the faith, but instead of puffing ourselves up about how much we know, our faith needs to look beyond itself and build others up in love and the love of Christ.

Paul asks, what happens if someone who is doing the faith sees you eating pagan temple food? You might know that there is only one God and Jesus Christ is his son and Jesus Christ is the only way, but what of that new Christian? He sees you worship in Christ, he sees you eating pagan temple food, and suddenly he's confused. Is there any difference between the two?

Paul is scathing: you have such wonderful knowledge about Jesus such great faith that allows you to eat that food, and by your great knowledge you destroy another person's relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul concludes: therefore I do not eat meat myself, lest someone might think I also worship at the pagan temple, and that leads them to fall.

So then, what is the lesson in all this? Is Paul saying that we must be vegetarians? On Super Bowl Sunday, when hot wings and pepperoni pizza await? No, it doesn't mean this, but by the way, we need to remember that sometimes we can reach Scripture so closely, that we miss the forest because of the trees. The issue is not, I'll be allowed to eat meat, the issue is the deeper principle

that lies behind all this discussion.

And the principle is this: love demands that we live our Christian life for the sake of others. That we encourage those who are weak in the faith, not by castigating their lack of knowledge, but by being careful to live lives that are shining examples of gospel truth.

What am I, what are you willing to sacrifice, for the sake of others? Here are some examples just a few. You can think of other examples, perhaps.

We know that we have great liberty in Jesus Christ. In fact, we are free to attend worship or not attend worship. Some have argued that they feel closer to God out of the woods, or on the golf course which I find hard to believe, or out fishing. And good for these folks, who have such a special relationship with God that they do not need to worship him with others.

But that's not the point. The point is this: there are others who gather in worship, and the more who gather in worship, the more strength we give and receive from one another. And if worship becomes just something you do when it is convenient, or there is no better option, then you can discourage others. Love builds up. If you love Jesus, then you are at worship on Sunday morning, not even for your own sake, or if not for your own say, then for the sake of others.

When my Christian witness sometimes falls apart, is that I like funny jokes. I love to tell them, I love to hear them. But what if I laugh at a joke that has racial overtones? In my relationship with Christ, I might know that I am not a racist, but I am free to laugh at what is funny. But what if someone standing beside me, who is not so sure of his faith? Does he suddenly think it is all right to believe in Jesus and think less of others because they belong to a different ethnic group?

I do not believe the Bible prohibits our drinking alcohol. After all, Jesus drank wine, not Welch's, and efforts to show that he drank non-alcoholic wine are paltry and laughable. Why then, do we serve grape juice at Communion? Why do I request no alcohol at church functions and even church parties hosted in homes? For the sake of those who are not so strong in the faith. For the sake of those who struggle with alcohol. We give up something for the sake of a weaker neighbor.

In our Christian Believer course, last week we talked about Jesus as Savior, Messiah, Lord. Many of us settle for Jesus as savior, the one who saves us from sin, from eternal death, but then live our lives pretty much the way we want to. Others regard Jesus only as Messiah, Christ, the one come to rescue them from trouble and death. But the call of God is for us to accept Jesus as Lord, that is to let Jesus have control over every aspect of our lives. Our time, our attitudes, our finances. Everything.

And when Jesus is Lord, then we live not just in relationship to him, but to our neighbors, to those who might not be so strong in the faith. And so we live, seeking to be living examples of the Lordship of Jesus. We can still laugh, still have a good time, still be real people, but we must live in such a way that non-Christians and weak Christians find something wonderful and compelling about Jesus Christ.

In other words, when weak Christians and non-Christians wonder "What's so special about Jesus," more than likely they don't search the Scriptures. More than likely they look at those who claim Jesus as Lord. And what does my life, your life say about Jesus' lordship.

That's the question. In Paul's day, there was a question about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul knew in Christ, he was free to partake of porkchop and ribeye, barbecue and sirloin.

Yet he chose to become a vegetarian in that situation that day. Why? Because even though knowledge said yes to eating meat, love for those weak in the faith said no.

What, attitudes, what actions, are we willing to give up not for our own sake, but so that others might come to know Jesus better? What changes am I, are you, willing to make, so that when others see us in action, they are led to say, "So, that's what Christ's love looks like."