

## “Categories of Right and Wrong”

I Corinthians 8:1-13 – February 1, 2009

INTRO: The situation behind this reading was a controversy among the Christians in Corinth about whether it was permissible to eat meat from animals used in ritualized pagan sacrifices. Either the Christians were going to feasts where this meat was served, or the meat was sold at the market at a budget price. And the Christians were arguing whether this was OK for them to eat.

I was behind a fellow at the drugstore the other day, who was buying candy. He had a pile of small individual packages of Razzles, Sweet Tarts, and Gummi Bears. As he started to ring up the candy, the clerk said, “Wow, some SuperBowl Party you’re going to have.” The man grinned and said, “it’s for my daughter’s birthday party. I really don’t like to buy them all this candy, but it’s what she wants.” I replied, “and that’s the way it should be on her birthday.” The Father knew this wasn’t his first choice regarding a healthy snack for those kids, but it was a special day, and some of those usual rules could be suspended for the day.

I received a Christmas letter from friends in Minneapolis. Last year, this couple read Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* book, which is based on the concept of eating locally. They said the book has shaped their gardening, their shopping habits, their lives. They belong to a community farm group, plant food in every corner of their city yard, haunt the farmers’ markets, and read the food labels carefully to see how far their food has traveled. They are gathering information so they can raise their own chickens. One of them has learned the art of bee-keeping, yet they are not sure bees and chickens will do well together, since chickens eat bees. And, in preparation for the winter, they canned, froze, dried, and stored every fruit and vegetable they could get their hands on. I read their letter, and even though I support and admire what they are doing, it made me feel like a lazy slug. Where does one get all the time to harvest, freeze, or can one’s own produce for the winter? I’m afraid if my friends lived in my neighborhood, I’d feel even worse, because I would constantly evaluate my food choices compared to theirs and to their ideas of what one should eat.

The people at Corinth were doing the same thing. They shared life together, with a variety of people—rich and poor, and they were trying to decide what was right for them, compared to their friends and neighbors. For them, the food they chose was a spiritual health issue. In Corinth, as in many places at that time, different religions coexisted together. There were statues of idols everywhere. Much of the meat sold in markets came from animals which had been sacrificed and offered to these idols and gods. Some Christians hesitated to eat this meat, others didn’t. Those who believed it was OK to eat the meat, thought that since an idol has no real existence for people who believe in the one God, then there was really no problem here. They didn’t believe in the idol, therefore they could eat the meat. Even though this argument is pretty logical, it disregards the feelings of some of the new Christians, who for years had worshiped these idols. It wasn’t easy for these new folks to make the total switch to a different system of beliefs. Perhaps emotionally they hadn’t yet made the total conversion to Christianity. So, the freedom enjoyed by some, to make the choice about what foods to eat, was becoming a kind of stumbling block for those who were still emotionally tied to their old religion.

The freedom we have to make individual decisions needs to be tempered by our love for our fellow human beings not just our rules. “Paul takes a middle road, endorsing neither position strongly. He recognizes the motives that drive both (those who abstain from eating the meat, and those who eat the meat). He then proposes an ethic based upon mutual respect. Paul knew that the work of Christ brings people into a new relationship with God (and with each other). And no one has a right to use these secondary issues to drive a wedge between people and between people and their God.” (Wayne Brouwer)

It is said that when the Pilgrims arrived on our soil, decisions about what crops to grow and what food to eat may have fueled their desire to secede from England. They quickly found that there was a problem with the Massachusetts soil — it would not grow wheat, a

fundamental crop for proper English families. Corn was much better suited to New England soil, but back in their homeland corn was something that you fed to pigs. In time, the Puritans began to copy the Mohegan and Pequot nations and grow corn, and after a while they even began to like it. But when colonial leader John Winthrop visited London and made the case that corn was completely fit for human consumption, people looked at him as if he were recommending that they eat dog food. Winthrop returned to Massachusetts and began to realize that his people weren't as English as they used to be. (*Homiletics*, Jan. 06)

If we were to follow Paul's lead, instead of fighting and disagreeing about our different viewpoints when it comes to the food we eat all the way to the political ideologies we have, we might find that our faith moves us to not concentrate so much on our differences, but to recognize our common humanity. "Knowledge makes us proud of ourselves, while love makes us helpful to others." (8:1)

Our differences may not be the barriers we assume they are, if we can find ways to develop relationships with people who eat, and live and think differently than we do. I was intrigued to read of President Obama's SuperBowl party today, where he invited people from both sides of the aisle. "A bipartisan group of 15 lawmakers, a bit heavier on Democrats and those from Pennsylvania, has been invited to join the President at the White House to watch the Pittsburgh Steelers take on the Arizona Cardinals. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said the gathering is another step in the president's effort to reach out to lawmakers and get to know them better in hopes of reducing the partisan rancor as they work together on the people's business." (*Journal/Sentinel*, 1/31/09)

We are facing a world that is much different than it was 12 months ago. "Our economy is in turmoil. Many financial institutions and other businesses are on life support. People are losing their jobs, their houses, their health insurance, their pensions." (*AARP Bulletin* Jan/Feb. 09)

And I think we are way beyond the time when we can just hole up in the spheres of our individual worlds and not have any contact with or concern about other people, who for one reason or another are perceived as different from us. Because, we are in this together. We don't have the luxury of assuming the problems we face are someone else's problems—they are all of our problems.

Our contemporary situation may mean we need to get beyond absolute categories of right and wrong when it comes to a lot of the little things of life, and realize there are a lot of gray areas. It is a time when a variety of churches and faith communities may be moved to finding new ways to be in ministry together. It is a time when no matter whether we are rich or poor, instead of having an absolute concern about whether our food is grown in our own backyard or not, we need to have more concern about whether other people have food at all.

For some in Poland, the taste of home is found in what they call milk bars. Patrons find tangy pickled cabbage, steaming potatoes, and the watery red slosh of beet soup...a timeless combination that has warmed the hearts of generations of Poles, through centuries of hardship and four grim decades of Soviet rule. To the untrained eye, Warsaw, Poland's gleaming capital, appears to be caught up in a mad race to out-Westernize the West. But behind the glittering facade beats the heart of a very different Poland. Milk bars, bare-bones cafes were set up by the communist authorities in the 1950s to ensure that everyone had at least one hot meal a day. The meals they offered – vegetarian and mostly milk-based – were unspectacular at best. But these milk bars have somehow managed to survive and thrive despite the onslaught of capitalism. Tables are nearly always shared; earnest university students and professors tuck into their lunch next to impoverished, elderly pensioners, and budget-conscious salary men rub elbows with local artists. One woman says: "they provide a place to socialize, where people are exposed to different categories of people. When we go to a restaurant, it's easy for us in the middle class to think we're the only people in the city. But when you go to a milk bar, that illusion is gone." (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 1/26/09)

The Milk Bars help to build relationships where differences might have typically taken the focus.

A holy man was having a conversation with God one day and said, "Lord, I would like to know what heaven and hell are like." God led the holy man to two doors. He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew, which smelled delicious and made the holy man's mouth water. The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles that were strapped to their arms, and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful. But because the handles were longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, "You have seen hell." They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man's mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The holy man said, "I don't understand." "It is simple," said God. "It requires but one skill. You see they have learned to feed each other, while the greedy think only of themselves." (*Homiletics*, Feb. 09)

When we let go of our categories of right and wrong, we may find new ways of seeing each other, and ultimately helping to share the resources that will give life to all of us.

--Sue Burwell