

When There's Tension in the Church  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Meat is murder.

That's what the PETA T-shirts say, (PETA - People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Popular among vegans and Petan's (Petan – PETA people not PETAN the Petroleum Technology Association of Nigeria), this slogan, Meat is Murder, sends the message that animals should never, ever be killed for food. Should you be interested, you can also purchase coffee mugs, hoodies, and tote bags imprinted with the phrase!

But **is** meat murder? For the apostle Paul, meat is something else: **A stumbling block**. He tells the Christians of Corinth, "I will never eat meat," not because he's a vegan or a Petan, 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).

Food is a powerful force - it can both nourish people and do great harm.

If Paul had been living in Europe in the 1500's, he might not only have had a meat problem, but a meat and potato problem. You see, up until then, hardly anyone in Europe had ever seen a potato, much less eaten one. It wasn't until the Spanish explorers brought them back from South America that Europeans learned about potatoes. And as it turns out, Europeans did not have an appetite for the potato, at least not initially...Since God had not mentioned potatoes in the Bible, clergy preached that the vegetable was the Devil's handiwork. Can you imagine a sermon today, condemning the satanic influence of potato salad and french fries?...Yeah, well, maybe!

Those Europeans 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 1500's, would have figured out that there was nothing really sinister about a potato. But since some people saw it as

demonic, he might have said “no thank you” on a baked potato that was fully loaded with broccoli and cheese. His explanation would be, "If what I eat is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat again"... or potatoes (v. 13).

Fortunately, the potato problem was solved in the 1700's when there was a series of crop failures, where many favorite crops died – except for the potato. People set aside their superstitions and began to embrace the potato, finding a variety of ways to prepare them. 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 the year 2008 "The Year of the Potato."

From the Devil's handiwork to a major food source in just 500 years.

So this brings us to our text, which is all about potatoes.

Okay, so it's about meat. But "meat-and-potatoes" – there is a connection...Ah, come to think of it, potatoes remind us of community - the church. You never pull up just a single potato just growing there alone in the dark. There's always a bunch of potatoes, a group - a community of potatoes. Contrast this with other tubers, like, say, the carrot, which never could be a metaphor for the church. Pull it up, and there it comes up all alone. So too, the onion. Also grows alone, and if you try to deal with it in the kitchen, it makes you cry! Or, how about the red beet, which grows alone and has a flavor that's so unusual many have to add other foods or spices to make it palatable.

But the potato! You pull up a potato plant and you get a group of potatoes. They're pretty ugly looking, but we love them anyway, and they don't make us cry.

Then, too, the potato can take on the appearance of a human face. You know the potato has eyes. Some even have mouths!

Take a paring knife, cut up a potato, throw it in the ground, and it will multiply itself and grow more potatoes - just like that! Can't do that with those self-centered, arrogant, and tasteless carrots, onions, or beets.

Okay, so we have wandered a bit. But 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 our 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 beginning point for discussing how Christians should treat one another.

Paul wants everyone in Corinth to be a member of "PETH" - People for the Ethical Treatment of Humans.

Paul 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 while 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 "whoever loves God is known by God" (v. 3).

So exactly what is happening in Corinth that is causing such a food fight? New Testament scholar J. Paul Sampley explains that 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 fellowship.

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. Now, for most

residents of Corinth, this was not a problem. But for Christians, who did not worship pagan gods, there was serious issue eating a top sirloin steak that had been sacrificed to idols. And unfortunately, these choice roasts and steaks popped up all over the place: In the market, in the homes of non-Christian neighbors, and in public festivals and ceremonies that were so important places to make personal, political, and business connections.

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 but one God, the Father, from whom are all things came and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (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's 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 that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it 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 these cheeseburger Christians to "be careful that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (v. 9).

For Paul, the challenge for the Christian community is to be a part of PETH - People for the Ethical Treatment of Humans. 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 weak conscience, you sin against Christ" (v. 12).

In conclusion, Paul says that "if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause 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?

We know that scripture confirms that 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 love one another" (John 13:35). A disciple who loves will never intentionally cause another disciple to stumble and fall.

So, what are we to do?

1. Loving behavior begins with a decision not to be selfish. The life of the church is not about you; it's about God and neighbor. Offer only those thoughts that are going to nourish your neighbor and build up the body of Christ.
2. 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.
3. Finally, 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 life. So when you look around, think of what you can sacrifice for others, in harmony with the sacrifice of Christ. Walk away from an activity that makes you comfortable, and take on the challenge of working with the poor or the disabled.

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 throw up their meat - or potatoes. Amen.

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