

Pastor's Message – 1/28/24
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

You've probably all heard the expression, "You are what you eat." Well, one day, a squirrel was lying on a couch in a psychiatrist's office, and said to the psychiatrist, "When I learned, 'You are what you eat,' I realized I was nuts!" Our Bible lesson today revolves around a food fight and specifically about whether the early Christians living in Corinth need to be mindful about the meat they eat.

It's important for us to remember that idol food was a big deal in Corinth, and unfortunately was found all over the city. Corinthians would frequently sacrifice an animal to a Greek god or goddess, burn some of the meat on an altar, and then eat some of it in a ritualistic meal.

The remainder of the sacrificial animal was sold to the local meat market, which then turns around and resells it to the public. It's kind of gross, but economical — you can probably get a pretty good deal on slightly-used, day-old idol-meat.

This poses a problem for the Christians of Corinth, who don't want to be associated with meat that has been sacrificed to a Greek deity. Given their choice, they won't ever eat such meat, but it's tough to avoid the stuff, since it can pop up at the local supermarket, or at a neighbor's dinner party, or in a religious festival that has important social significance.

What's a Christian to do?

Paul was clear our freedom in Christ meant we no longer lived under all of the Law of Moses. Christians were now free, right? They could act as they felt individually led, right? So, even though the Old Testament, and even the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) had banned eating meat offered to idols, that no longer really applied to Christians, did it?

You may answer that question, as many Christians do and did, "it depends." There are grey areas in moral decisions and the answer may differ from culture to culture and from time to time. What Christians once believed and what we now believe may be different. The morality of one time and place may not be the same as it is now. What people once believed to be true in every circumstance and every place may not always be true.

Take this demonstration for example. Each of three people is holding a small block of pine wood. The first person releases the block and, naturally, it falls to the ground. The second person releases the block, and it moves upwards. The third person releases the block, and it remains in exactly the same place. Someone is reporting this to you over the telephone. In the first case, the behavior is expected. In the second case, the behavior is bizarre. In the third case, the behavior is simply unbelievable. This is because you assume that all three cases are taking place in the same universe.

It turns out that the first person is standing on the surface of the earth, so the

wood falls to the ground. The second person happens to be standing underwater, so naturally the wood floats upwards. This is perfectly normal and logical in that situation. The third person is in an orbiting spacecraft with zero gravity, so the piece of wood stays just where it has been released. This is also normal and logical in that universe.

Do morality and ethics and what is considered Christian behavior remain the same from place to place and independent of history? Many cultures in Paul's day and ours did not and do not live with the same cultural assumptions. The extraordinary pluralism of Corinth, because it was a major trading station on a land bridge separating the Ionian and Aegean Seas, meant that in practice, if not in law, the peoples of Corinth lived with something at least similar. They had to develop a sort of working toleration of cultural differences to keep some semblance of order and peace among incredibly diverse practices of peoples from all over the Mediterranean and beyond. Sound familiar with the melting pot that is America and with the smaller and smaller global village that we live in?

So, what's a Christian to do? As to the question, Paul noted that he and some other Christians had gained enough theological sophistication to understand that idols and their rituals were meaningless, and all gifts come from the only one real God there is (verse 6). Therefore, in theory, it needn't matter where meat comes from. Meat could simply be received with gratitude as from God. Christians have the freedom to make this choice.

However, Paul noted persons who have just recently come into the Christian community could be damaged by seeing other Christians eat meat offered to idols. Many of them would have come from a lifetime of training to regard the meat offered to idols as binding them to the gods to whom it was sacrificed. At the same time, in the process of becoming a Christian, they had renounced allegiance to all gods but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whose Spirit now dwelled in them through baptism. Eating meat offered to gods they had renounced would be anathema to such persons. That is why seeing others in the Christian community engage in a practice felt to be anathema could be destructive.

What's a Christian to do? The best course, according to Paul, is to do your best to avoid eating idol meat. He recommends these table manners not out of knowledge, but out of love. He knows that there is really nothing poisonous about this food, but as a compassionate Christian he doesn't want to do anything to cause a brother or sister to stumble. "If food is a cause of their falling," concludes Paul, "I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall" (8:13).

John Wesley and Methodists after him realized that what is acceptable and OK for one may be dangerous or sinful or inappropriate for others. One can look through the United Methodist Book of Discipline to learn what United Methodists believe about social issues and social principles. From time to time I have been asked if United Methodist Churches can hold raffles. No. Raffles are gambling and United Methodists refrain from gambling because of the danger of addiction to some.

United Methodists don't use wine in our Celebration at the Lord's Table and, while not taking a prohibitive stance against alcohol, recognize the dangers of alcohol for those who struggle with alcoholism. There are people who cannot resist addictions and so the United Methodist Social Principles warn against those things.

Christians know that others in society watch us; parents know that children watch and see and hear everything that they do. It's like the story of Murray.

Murray was tired of his eight-year-old brother, Jack, following him all over the place.

"Go home, Jack," he said, "quit following me."

"Mother told you to look after me," reminded Jack.

Murray was on his way to the five and dime store. He didn't want Jack following him there. He'd seen a pocketknife he wanted. He had figured out how to get it.

But Mother's orders were Mother's orders. "Okay," he said, "but stay out of my way."

He entered the store, Jack tagging along behind him. He sauntered over to the counter with rubber bands, paper clips, and other neat things. He had picked up a package of rubber bands and slipped them into his pocket unnoticed just last week.

Next, Murray drifted by the notions counter. Just looking. After examining needles and thimbles without picking them up, he wandered over to the pocketknife counter.

The knife he wanted was a four-blade, pearl handled knife. One of the blades was created to drill holes. It would work well punching extra holes in a belt. It could be used to bore holes through thin boards, like those on orange crates.

Murray didn't look at the knives near the pearl handled one first. He gradually worked his way toward his prize. They were in the bin closest to the front. When he reached the spot he wanted, he reached with his left hand for a pocketknife at the back of the counter. It was a cheap one-bladed knife with an ugly green handle. While leaning over the counter, his hidden right hand grabbed the knife he wanted and slipped it into his shirt. He looked at the green handled knife, shook his head, and tossed it back into the bin where he had gotten it.

"C'mon, Jack," he said, "let's go home."

On the way home he slipped the knife out of his shirt and looked at it with admiration. He slipped it into his pocket and whistled on his way home.

As he walked into the house, Mother called him back to the kitchen where she was preparing dinner. The odor of baked sweet potatoes was unmistakable.

"Let me see the knife," she said.

"What knife?" asked Murray.

She stood there with an outstretched hand. Reluctantly he pulled the loot from his pocket and handed it to her. She held it up and examined it carefully. She rubbed her thumb across the pearl handle. She held it so she could see how many blades it had.

"This is an excellent knife," she said.

"It has a blade that can punch holes in leather," Murray said excitedly.

"Too bad you can't keep it."

Murray's heart dropped.

"Mr. Gray called me," Mother continued. "He was watching you through the lattice that separates the office area from the rest of the store. He almost missed it. He said if you hadn't slipped it into your shirt, you could have walked out of the store undetected.

Murray felt a surge of pride. Mother continued again.

"He said that if you returned the knife to him personally and said you were sorry and promised never to steal anything again, he wouldn't report you to the police."

Murray took the knife back and with hanging head, he turned to go. Jack spoke up.

"Do I have to give mine back, too?" he asked.

Murray's mouth dropped open. So did Mother's. Mother was right. Jack copied everything his older brother did. Even when Murray didn't know it.

Before Mother could speak, Murray answered his little brother's question. "Yeah, Squirt. You copy everything else I do. Now you can copy this."

You are what you eat or see or hear or do ... or, in this case, you are what you do not. Paul's refusal to eat meat shows that he is a compassionate Christian, one who values love above knowledge. More than anything else, he wants to behave in a way that nourishes, strengthens, and builds up the Christian community, the body of Christ.

You are what you eat and see and do and hear. When we gather on the 1st Sunday of the month, our traditional Communion Sunday, to eat and drink and celebrate at the Lord's Table, or whenever we share Communion, we gather and give thanks for God's goodness and for God's unconditional love. We gather as a community of believers who look after each other out of love, not just here in this Church building, but in this community, in our Wisconsin Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church but with Christians around the world. Whenever we gather as the church of God of Jesus we gather to receive and acknowledge God's grace and offer the same to others.

Appropriate then, is the Confirmation of Faith of Lena and Troy as they join the Church as Professing Members. Those who are already Professing Members have the privilege and responsibility of passing on your faith and supporting them and others in their faith journey. Those who have already made the commitment to live out their faith as Professing Members in your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service have the privilege and responsibility of showing an example of followers of Jesus who reveal God's love and God's presence. All believers are called to answer Jesus' invitation and decide to follow Jesus' and show and share God's love to the world.