

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
8:30 and 10:45 a.m. Sunday, January 29, 2012
The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I like to eat. I am not a “foodie,” but I am not a “steak and potatoes” kind of a guy, either. Being married to a vegetarian, I’ve learned about a whole lot of other foods, specifically about how important legumes are. Foods that I don’t like: mushrooms. I can live without mushrooms, but I eat tofu. I do **not** care for coconut, but I know that’s more of a psychological thing than anything else. As for shrimp, lobster, crabs, squid, and octopus: no thank you. I let those folks who enjoy squishy things that look like insects, they can have those. On the other hand, in my life I have eaten and have enjoyed bear, and elk, and bison. I can make a meal out of a head of broccoli or cauliflower; and I regularly eat turkey and chicken. I enjoy a good pulled pork sandwich too, or as referred to here in Central Pennsylvania, a Bar-B-Que.

Now I know, too, that in the Brock household we are fortunate enough to be able to afford the food that we enjoy, the food that’s good for us. That’s not the case with everyone I know, even here in Trinity. A friend of mine here at Trinity is on food stamps and for various reasons many times by the end of the month he comes up short.

So let me ask you this: what would you do if you or your family were really hungry? What would you be willing to do in order to feed your family? Or to try to lighten the question, how much of a food gourmet are you? How much does food affect your life?

To the congregation in Corinth in the first century (that’s in Greece), food, specifically in their case, meat, had become an issue. I am going to go out on a limb here and assume that most of you probably are not up on the list of the Greek pantheon, let alone their worship practices, so allow me to give a quick little background. There are loads of Greek gods. Some of the ones you’ve probably heard of would be folks like Zeus or Hera, Poseidon, Ares, Apollo, Athena, or Hades. Those are all the Greek folks. And, as in most places there would be temples and as an expression of faith, people would go to those temples to offer a sacrifice, to celebrate, or to have a festival. If you are going to make a suitable offering, just like at the temple in Jerusalem, you would go with a lamb or goat, or a bull, or some kind of bird. The temple priest would make that offering for you; but they wouldn’t necessarily always use the whole critter. There would have leftovers. What would they do with the “excess” meat? Well they might have a big cookout in honor of that particular deity, a neighborhood Bar-B-Que, so to speak. Another option is that they could sell that meat down at the local market.

Now if the temple is having a celebration, it’s “free food.” Everybody’s welcome. So if you’re poor, it’s a great place to go to get a free meal. You just have to realize that the party, the celebration, is in honor of which ever deity that temple belongs to. And so

therefore, the food that you are about to eat has at some point been given in honor to that deity. So there are some people who would say that because you're eating the food there at Zeus' temple, you're endorsing belief in Zeus. 'Well' you might say to yourself, 'I'll just go down to the market and get myself a nice fresh rump roast. No problem there.' Except that the cow from which that afore mentioned rump roast came from was probably first offered up to Hera or Apollo. So that by eating that rump roast, there are those who would say, 'well you're still worshiping Hera or Apollo, just by eating that meat, even though it's not at the temple.'

We've got at least two problems here. First, is eating food that has been offered to the Greek gods, from a Christian or Jewish point of view of false idols, is that still a form of worshiping those idols? And Second, then, are believers allowed to eat food that has been offered to another god regardless of the authenticity of that god? So I would say that the answer to the first question there is most Christian believers would say, 'I know that Jesus is way more popular than Zeus or Hera, or Apollo, so I am going to go and get all of the free food and all of the cheap food that I can get because by doing so in no way shape or form am I worshiping that deity.'

The problem though is that there were members in the congregation in Corinth who said that that was worshiping Zeus or Hera or Apollo, even though they were not gathered in a setting like the one we're sitting in this morning, even though there was no worshiping or bowing down, or praying or liturgy. The second question, is it permissible? Well, okay, admittedly in the law of Moses, there are no direct commands that prohibit the eating of food that has been offered to somebody else. There are references not to *worship* false idols; we get those in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. But, those are talking about making idols, or worshiping them, not *eating food* that has been offered to them.

So is it permitted? For those of us Christians in the Lutheran tradition, we would tend to say that this is one of those 'grey' areas. Let me try to explain it this way (I think I have this analogy correct, I am not a sports guy, so I am sorry if I got this wrong): Say you are a diehard Steelers fan and somebody has given you free tickets to the Eagles game (or insert whatever teams you might want, the Red Sox, and the Mets, or whoever). By going to the game of your team's rival, are you being disloyal to your team?

Paul goes on to make this point; food does not bring us closer to God. Which is a pretty good point, regardless of how heavenly that Pennsylvania Bakery chocolate cake that I had last week might be. Food does not bring us closer to God. However, I know, I *know*, that eating meat that has been first offered to Zeus, or attending the Eagles game if you are a Steelers fan, is in no way a way of me worshiping Zeus, or being disloyal to the Steelers. But what about those who think that it **is**? What is my responsibility to those who might see me eating a Bar-B-Que there at Zeus' temple and think "Hey, Brock's getting a free meal. If he's there then maybe that means it's alright to go ahead and worship Zeus in addition to Jesus. Maybe that means that Jesus is the main guy, but it's cool to give a shout out to Zeus. Or *maybe* Zeus is *just* as cool as Jesus, *just* as powerful as Jesus." And Paul says **that's** where the problem is. If my eating at Zeus Bar-B-Que is going to trip up somebody else, if it's going to make someone else worship something that I know that is not true, then **I am** the one at fault.

Let me try putting it this way. I don't have anything against alcohol. I simply don't care for the taste of most alcohol. I definitely don't have a drinking problem (just don't look at all the Mountain Dew in my office). Most of the people that I know don't have a drinking problem. We have alcohol in our house; we offer it to guests who come over. If, however, I invite over a person that I know is struggling to stay sober, and if I or other people present in my house drink alcohol in front of that individual, how responsible, how supportive, how faithful am I being to my friend. If drinking even the quarter wine of glass that I might consume, I cause them to think that they too can handle just a little, am I being the witness that God causes me to be, to those whose faith, to those whose will power is not the same as mine?

Did you catch how Paul ended this reading this morning? ¹³ "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." Paul is not advocating that we all become vegetarians, or let alone vegans. What he is saying is if my behavior is going to cause someone else to sin, then I am called by my faith, by my baptism, to stop doing whatever it is regardless whether I believe it's wrong or not. So what might you be doing? While it doesn't necessarily adversely affect your life, what is that doing or impacting others?

Martin Luther wrote once, "A Christian is perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all." Christ's grace and love and forgiveness sets us free from the human law that would weigh us down. Christ's grace and love and forgives us, set us beholden to, answerable to, all other believers. Paul will talk about that a little bit more in chapter nine, so go home, pick up your bible, 1 Corinthians 9, read it.

But more importantly, pay attention to what you do.

Amen.

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