

## To Eat or Not to Eat

TEXT: Romans 14:13-23

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on January 29, 2023*

Last week we looked at how the questions and issues surrounding the addition of Gentiles to the Jewish followers of Jesus became perhaps the largest bone of contention in the years following Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' ministry had been limited to Israel. On purpose. He is explicit about that in the gospels.

But we are told he was equally explicit about telling his followers that once he was gone, they should branch out everywhere, which they did. But it was then up to Jesus' earliest followers to figure out how to make it all work, once a movement that had been confined to an area just a little larger than New Jersey began to spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

While many were part of the effort, the person with the best combination of personality, education, privilege, and experience to direct that process was Paul. It is the subtext of just about all of his letters, where we learn how Paul interpreted the Torah in light of Jesus' teaching in an attempt to hold Jews and Gentiles together under one religious roof. The genius of Paul is found, not in the specifics of his instructions on what to do about the particular issue, but in the broad principles he extracts from the conflict to show us how to live faithfully with those whose customs and forms of religious expression are different than our own.

So this morning I want to look at the particular conflict of eating meat sacrificed to idols, and see where Paul takes both them and us. While I took his words about the issue from his letter to Rome as our reading for this morning, it is also the subject of all of chapter 8 in his letter to Corinth. If you remember from last week, Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church was actually a response to a set of questions that they first sent to him. Chapter 8 of that letter references one of those questions with the words, "Now about food sacrificed to idols."

It will help here if we understand the technical issue. Most Christians have a general sense of the animal sacrifice that went on in biblical times. But, at least for me, I was so caught up in worrying about all the animals being slaughtered that it was quite a while before I realized what that system really provided.

We've talked about one of those provisions before. The tithe. Jews from eleven of the twelve tribes of Israel had to bring 10% of their flocks, herds, or agricultural products as an offering to the Temple each year so that the twelfth tribe, the tribe of Levi, could be sustained while they kept the Temple up and running. Okay, so not all of the animals that were killed as sacrifices were just burned up on the altar. The Levites got 10 percent of the meat and agricultural offerings, and then they burned 10 percent of *that* so that they made sacrifices, too, and everyone was treated the same.

But it wasn't just the tribe of Levi who benefitted from the system. Apart from the tithe, all the other sacrifices—sin offerings, thanksgiving for a new baby, or whatever—were the main way that everyone else got meat for themselves. The sacrificial system was an integral part of Israel food supply chain. You packed up your sheep, cow, or whatever and took it to the Temple for the sacrifice. A small portion was taken by the priests, but the rest went back home with you to feed your family.

The same system was how the people who came to Jerusalem for the great feast days were fed. The Bible tells us that at the dedication of King Solomon's temple, around 960 BCE, they sacrificed 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep over a two-week period. There were so many sacrifices that Solomon had to set up extra altars on the temple grounds. But that wasn't just wanton killing. It was a two-week long barbeque for the thousands of people who gathered there across those two weeks in celebration of the Temple's dedication. There's a reason they're called "feast days."

Further, the way the Israelites got their meat was far more humane than the way we do today. In fact, the kosher laws for how to slaughter an animal have limiting the suffering of the animal as a core value. The rest of us have few if any such laws, and meat comes to our tables in far more horrible ways than any meat ever

came to the tables of the Israelites. Every bit of their meat was locally sourced and humanely slaughtered. Which is an oxymoron to some, I know. Our system of putting meat on the table is far, far worse. Most of us just don't have to see it and so we let it go on unchecked.

So, the first thing to understand is that eating meat that had been *sacrificed* was not the problem Paul was dealing with. The problem was not sacrificed meat, it was meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Why was that happening? Well, the system for sacrificing animals that then became your own food was not only practiced by Jews. It was such a great idea, that pagan cultures did it, too.

Classical Greek comedies often poke fun at the fact that the Greeks tended to offer only the inedible parts of an animal to the gods and kept all the rest for themselves. For them, too, the sacrificial system provided meat for individuals and also for massive holiday celebrations for thousands of people. Jews celebrated their holy days at their Temple, so did the Greeks and others.

So, now imagine you're in the ancient Greek city of Corinth. Corinth was an old city, founded about 6500 BCE—about the same time as Jericho's walls were built. The first triremes, the Greek battleships, were built there. By the Classical age, the city rivaled both Athens and Thebes in wealth and architecture. Remember Corinthian columns? The cost of living was so prohibitive that the poet Horace wrote that, "Not everyone is able to go to Corinth."

Corinth was also known for its more than 1,000 temple prostitutes, one of whom was so famous that she has her own Wikipedia entry. If you want to read about her, her name was Lais. Greek as a language got a new word out of the city. *Korinthiazesthai*—to live like a Corinthian—meant to live a life of wealthy, drunken debauchery.

To live up to that reputation required lavish feasts; and lavish feasts, not to mention thousands of ladies in the pagan temples that needed to eat, too, meant lots of animal sacrifices to provide the entrees for the feasting. Throw in a very wealthy city with individuals who wanted to host lots of guests in their homes. Make your sacrifice to whichever god you'd prefer, leave the inedible parts at the temple and then bring the rest home for your guests.

And to muddy the waters even further, if you were wealthy and could afford to have meat whenever you wanted, you might make some sacrifices just to sell the meat to a market. Support the temple and make money for yourself at the same time. Jews living in Corinth could hardly go to Jerusalem every time they wanted meat, but buying meat at the market was dicey because they had no idea where the meat had come from. They needed very strict sourcing, a Jewish butcher you could trust, and so on.

That problem got a *lot* bigger for Jews in the diaspora once you started mingling Jews and Gentiles in the churches Paul established. Remember that, before Christians were being thrown to the lions, the early churches met in the homes of wealthy patrons. And the central event of that house church meeting was a full meal, where people brought food to share. A potluck, if you will. Those meals were the first form of what we celebrate now as Holy Communion. It was a very literal feast.

It wasn't until persecution forced Christians to start meeting in secret in the catacombs that the meal turned into a token piece of bread and a sip of wine passed around. A tiny reminder of the grand feast of fellowship that was and that, they hoped and prayed would be again.

We actually have communion, as it was originally set up, every Sunday. It's called coffee hour. Since I need to avoid gluten, I go into coffee hour each week wondering if there will be something there I can eat. That's not so far off from what Jewish followers of Jesus had to ask when they went to church in the home of a Greek patron or visited over a meal at another time. Except the stakes for them were higher. Where did this meat come from? If it came from a market, there was no real way to know.

Well, you say, certainly they could just tell everyone to make sure the meat came from a kosher butcher, right? You could, but remember from last week that the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 created separate rules for Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. Both groups were to refrain from things "polluted by idols," but what

did that mean? What if someone brought meat that came from a pagan sacrifice? If they just picked it up at the market, no one would even know. And some reasoned that if idols weren't really gods after all, meat from a sacrifice to a piece of stone or wood couldn't really pollute anything.

Gentile believers likely saw no point in worrying about it, especially since they could have family consequences for giving up the pagan feast days if everyone else still gathered at the Temple of Apollo to celebrate. It would be like us refusing to show up for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner. And both Gentile and Jewish merchants could lose important connections by issues surrounding the sourcing of food. Those of you in business, think about how many deals and how much networking is done over food. Think of what has been lost over the years of Covid when we could not eat together. They were already giving up a lot to follow Jesus. Did this really matter?

Since the Corinthians went to considerable trouble to write Paul about it, clearly they had people with strong feelings on both sides of the issue. Paul's initial response is in 1 Corinthians 8. But the problem with sourcing meat was bigger than Corinth; and so, when Paul is composing his letter to the church in Rome (which was essentially his grant proposal to get the church that Peter founded and that he had never met to support his proposed mission to Spain) he thinks the problem through more thoroughly. What is really at issue here? Is there a way to be faithful followers of the Torah and Christ together?

Paul's answer is classic. He responds, in essence, "It's not about you. It also isn't about the meat and it's not even about the idols. It's about your relationship with other believers. If what you are doing, even if it's perfectly correct, is shaking the faith of someone else, keep it to yourself or, if that's not possible, don't do it at all."

Paul acknowledges that those who have a more mature faith are not harmed by eating meat sacrificed to idols. He concedes the point that an idol is a false god and that meat is meat. So yeah, those of you who realize that aren't committing some heinous sin by eating meat sacrificed to Apollo, even if you chow down in front of his statue in his temple at a feast in his honor. Apollo is not real. No harm, no foul. HOW. EV. ER. If someone whose faith is less mature than yours is misunderstanding and losing their faith by seeing you feasting in Apollo's temple, that's the real problem. The sin is not in eating the meat; the sin is in harming the faith of another in your community. In Romans 14:15 he says, "If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died." In verse 21 he advises, "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall."

The responsibility of the more mature is to nurture and help the less mature. It's the strong who should help the weak; it's the privileged who should help the oppressed; it's the rich who should help the poor; it's the most important person who should accept the place of the least. But there's another part of his advice. The meat eaters might argue, "But how is someone's faith harmed by what I'm doing? Especially if you, Paul, are telling me I'm right that since an idol is not a real god, there's nothing wrong with it?"

The answer to that is more nuanced. In the last line of Romans 14 Paul says, "Whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." What Paul is saying here is that sin is ultimately a matter of the heart. If, in my heart, I believe something is wrong, and then do it anyway, I have sinned because what God wants is a heart that is always trying to do the right thing, even if we sometimes fail. A heart that is thinking, "This is wrong, but he's doing it, so I will, too," is sin, even if there is technically nothing wrong with what the other guy is doing.

To get at Paul's point, I want to leave you with a story from my life as a case study. Then at communion...errr...coffee hour, you can talk over what was right or wrong about it.

It was January of 1979. I was 19 years old and sitting in the home of an elderly couple in the Bavarian alps. I had stayed in Germany after a college music tour to do some extra touring with a friend whose uncle lived in Germany and was willing to put us up for an additional week. Her uncle then proceeded to take us around both

to see the sights and to meet family members that my friend had never met. And so we sat with these two members of her extended family. My friend, Deb, me, Deb's uncle, and the couple.

Although as a German major my German was pretty good, the dialect in rural alpine communities was tough for me to decipher. But clearly we were welcomed and they brought out food and drink for us to share. It was the drink that was the problem. I was raised in a pretty strict household. There was no alcohol in our home, and it had been made clear to me that this was a religious issue. My mother wouldn't even buy a raffle ticket from one of her students if one of the prizes was a liquor basket. As a Baptist, communion had grape juice, as we do here. In fact, even at age 19, the only alcohol that had ever crossed my lips was when my baptismal class visited an Episcopal church and we took communion there. No one prepared me for the fact that it would be wine. But that's another story.

My point here is that I was a "no" on any and all alcohol and alcohol was what this couple offered me. I tried to explain that I could not drink it, but I couldn't make myself understood. They kept offering me different kinds of alcohol. I refused every time. I believed it was sin. I would not take it.

When we got back to Deb's uncle's house, he explained that I had deeply offended the couple in my refusal. They interpreted my refusal as saying that what they offered was not good enough, and their repeated attempts to bring something I would drink was them bringing out the better and better stuff in the hopes of coming up with an offering that would meet what they saw as my impossibly high standards. But nothing would do. They felt humiliated as hosts, and I was horrified to learn of the harm I caused them.

In my mid-twenties, I told that story to a man in my church in Maryland, referencing Romans 14 to say that I now thought I should have accepted the drink and at least pretended to take a sip so that I would not offend their offer of hospitality. He said no—based on the same chapter—because if I believed it was sinful to drink, then it would be for me, even if it were not for them.

I will leave you to mull over my dilemma. But, whether I did the right thing or the wrong thing in that situation, Paul's point from this morning's passage is, I think, the correct one:

"Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.

"Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval." Amen.