



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year B – Epiphany 4 – January 28, 2018: Christian diet choices

This morning's letter from Paul is an interesting passage to consider. I doubt seriously that it's one that preachers preach on very often. It's a bit dense and really rather wordy, but it's rich with food for thought for us to chew on.

Paul's letter reminds me of a story my grandfather used to tell me when I was a little kid about how when he was a little kid, he and his friends would go to the Japanese graveyard in Kukuihaele, the small village on the Hamakua Coast where he grew up, and how they would steal the food offerings off of the gravestones, especially if it was fresh fruit. In fact, sometimes they would hide in the bushes and watch; and as soon as the families left, they would pounce on the graves.

And when I lived in Guam I had a friend who grew up in war-torn Saigon and out of basic necessity she would do the same thing—go and take food off the graves to prevent from starving to death.

It was food on Buddhist gravestones and many would consider it food offered to idols.

So, what would you and I do with food that's been offered up to an idol? Do we go to dinners where that kind of food is served? Do we have all the answers to these kinds of questions? Do we automatically have the knowledge base in our heads to know, without reservations, what's okay and not okay to eat?

Paul seems to be telling us that humble hearts can help us more than proud minds. We may think we know a lot, but compared to God we actually know very little, don't we? God may have answers we never imagined or dreamed of.

And if idols hold no power, what's wrong with eating food offered to them? Nothing magically happened to it when it was offered up and so it's just like any other food. You and I know that. But what if knowing isn't everything? And if knowing becomes the most important thing in our spiritual lives, then some of us are going to strive to be know-it-alls and treat others with condescension and disdain. Actually, I think we're all spiritually mature enough to know that real knowledge, knowledge grounded in God's truth, couldn't possibly be that insensitive and unloving.

And what do we do with people who aren't as savvy about these kinds of things as we think we might be? Do we turn our noses and look down on them with disdain, or do we set good examples instead?

As a teacher, I always believed that I had to model the behavior I wanted from my students, I had to practice what I preached, and I had to take my students where they were at and move them along to where I thought they should be. So, Paul's kind of knowing, a knowing based on love, says that in order to take them where they're at and then move them along, we don't eat the food offered to idols because we don't want people to think we're worshipping those idols – even if we know better and our intent is pure. And it becomes an act of love rather than an act of haughtiness and pride.

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When it comes right down to it, God probably doesn't care about what we eat and I don't think God's going to grade our spirituality on whether we're carnivores, vegetarians or vegans. But as Eugene Peterson says in *The Message*, "God does care when you use your freedom carelessly in a way that leads a fellow believer still vulnerable to those old ways and systems to be thrown off track."

So, if we use our freedom to go to a banquet thrown in honor of idols where the main course is food sacrificed to idols, there's a great danger that someone still struggling over the issue is going to look up to us as knowledgeable and mature going into that banquet and become terribly confused—maybe even to the point of getting mixed up in what is right and wrong. And so, the loving thing to do would be to use our freedom to make a loving choice and not eat the food. That's a different kind of knowing than knowing, intellectually, that the food has been sacrificed to idols and tradition says it's tainted. Instead it's a loving kind of knowing—a knowing based on wisdom, a knowing that follows the heart.

As for the one who doesn't get it as well as we think we do—Jesus died on the cross for that person, so maybe it's not so much to ask us to give up a dinner for him or her, because, as the Bible says, it really doesn't make a difference. What does make a difference is if we hurt that person and risk his eternal ruin. If we have any incarnational theology and if we believe that Jesus lives in every person then when we hurt our friend that way, we also hurt the Christ who dwells in that human heart.

So, what are we called to do in the midst of all of this?

In his commentary on this passage, V. Bruce Rigdon points out that knowledge without love puffs up, but knowledgeable love builds up the community. He also says this:

This brief account raises many questions for our own congregational life. What are the appropriate relationships between the church and its surrounding cultures? What practices should the church condone or condemn in relation to the cultures of secularism, materialism, and nationalism? How can the church act prophetically in a society and at the same time maintain appropriate pastoral relations with its divided membership? How does the church relate to the pluralistic environment in which it finds itself? The range of issues is immense, from whether the American flag should be displayed in the sanctuary, to poverty in our society, to whether gay and lesbian Christians may hold positions of leadership in congregations. At the heart of it all is whether the church views Christ as one who teaches us to build fortresses to protect Christian community or as one who is himself the bridge to neighbors of others faiths and traditions.

It's a lot to think about. So, let's ground ourselves in prayer, let's take in the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine, and then let's move forward with faith, faith and love, love for others and love for God—and it all starts right here and right now, with this bread and this wine. *Bon appetite!*

Amen.