**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Concerning Food Offered to Idols . . .”*

1 Corinthians 8

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The epistle reading from the 8th chapter of the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians couldn’t be more irrelevant for most of us, I suspect. You’ve got 99 problems, and this ain’t on of them. Paul is answering a question the Christians in Corinth have asked about whether they can eat food sacrificed to idols. Isn’t it nice sometimes to look at someone else’s problems that aren’t your own? Their problem became Paul’s for sure. His response makes up the whole of chapter 8, which we heard this morning, weaves through a long reflection in chapter 9 about rights and servanthood, makes its way into chapter 10 in a discussion about idolatry and the glory of God, and can be seen as background of a discussion about the Lord’s supper in chapter 11 and the church’s unity as a body of diversity in chapter 12. Totally irrelevant to us, but a big enough deal to them.

Apparently, around Corinth, like most of the world then, were a number of temples, mostly small places of oblation, where people made animal sacrifices. Some kind of prayer was said and the animal was formally dedicated to whatever god or goddess was being wooed. Then there was a barbecue. The meat then was eaten in the temple and sold at meat markets all over town. Almost all the new Christians in Corinth had grown up in a world where this is the food you ate, probably without thinking too much about it. Does being Christian make them different now?

Our foremothers and forefathers faced the theological and relational complexity of these kinds of questions as soon as they toweled off from their baptisms. In that time, Christianity and Judaism were the only two religious communities that worried about their uniqueness. Other religious expressions around them drew few rigid boundaries, and didn’t concern themselves with anything like the one true God or false idols. That just wasn’t an issue for them. Cities like Athens, Rome, Delphi and Corinth were full of statues and temples to all kinds of gods who were called on to do all kinds of things: make it rain, help them win wars, deliver healthy baby boys, keep the wine flowing. But then, over in the corner, you’ve got Christians and Jews who have the Shema ringing in their ears: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.

Christians even were able to understand a human being as the incarnate second person of the Trinity, still one true God, not a second God. So this monotheistic commitment was right at the heart of Christian proclamation, even early on before the creeds and confessions helped find Trinitarian language to give expression to these mysteries. Paul cites this as part of his response, “for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

So what’s a Christian to do, they asked? Can you eat that meat? Why can’t you eat the meat if you know those aren’t real gods anyway? If you can’t, how far must you go, in the meat market or at your neighbor’s table, to ensure you aren’t getting any of the idol meat on your plate? Early on, Paul had taught them about Jesus as the incarnate presence of the eternal God, about the crucifixion and resurrection, sin and salvation, but he didn’t get into any of this.

My guess is there was a forehead furrowed debate about these things within the congregation, until someone said to put it on the list for the letter to Paul. And they did. I’d give anything to have a copy of that letter they apparently sent him. We don’t, yet. Maybe it’s buried in the sand somewhere waiting to be discovered, but we do have Paul’s response, “Now concerning food offered to idols. . . .

For over three chapters in the Bible, can you believe it, this question is dealt with: can Christians eat food that’s been sacrificed to idols? Apparently this was a big issue for that first generation of Christians in Corinth, Greece. That it’s not for us has more to do with our social location than the merit of the issue. It’s still an issue in some places today for Christians.

I’m aware of one pastor in Toronto (Scott Hoezee) who preached on this saying: “I know this issue doesn’t affect any of us, so let’s figure out how to translate it for our times.” All went fine, except one college-aged woman lingered after the service long enough to come up to the preacher and say, “So, thanks for the sermon and all.  But I was just wondering: I am dating this Hindu guy and go with him sometimes to the Temple on Friday nights.  They have all this food laid out on a kind of table in front of pictures of Vishnu and stuff and after dedicating it all to the gods, they then have a potluck.  So I was just wondering: is it OK that I eat that food or not?  I mean, a lot of it is pretty tasty but something about it is worrying me.”

So there it is, at least one dimension of this question that, now we can say, has been faced by Christians from the first generation until today. Christians who have lived anywhere and been business partners with, friends and neighbors with, anyone who is not Christian: how do we navigate the boundaries between the church and the culture around us?

Not only does Paul’s response take over three chapters, but has also been called subtle, convoluted, roundabout, seemingly self-contradictory in places. This should have been simple. On one hand, enlightened Christians know there is only one God, so food sacrificed to an idol is just food. Nothing has changed. So that seems like a done deal. Eat up. But on the other hand, would you be worshipping an idol or giving the impression that you are? That’s a problem. The early church leaders had actually already taken up this issue. Acts 15 tells of the Jerusalem council where these boundary questions were sorted out. One of the things they said clearly in Jerusalem was about this exact issue: Christians cannot eat food sacrificed to idols. That seems like a done deal.

Except it wasn’t. Not in life as it is actually lived with real people, real neighbors. In Jerusalem at the council with the leaders, maybe everything seemed clear. In Corinth among the people, things get more complex. The questions always get more complex when there are relationships at stake, especially when it may cost you something personally. It’s one thing to pontificate about issues; it’s another to be personally involved. If there’s one thing we learn from this, it’s that Christianity is not a spectator sport, lived from the sidelines. It’s about relationship and being willing to set aside your rights, your privileges, your self for someone else.

What they may not expect is that when they pose their questions to the Apostle, he isn’t just going to give them straight answers about specific problems. He is going to call them to a higher vision of Christian community. He’s going to tell them that every question in every situation does not have simple answers, so always keep this in mind: In Christ Jesus, you belong to each other, you must sacrifice for each other, you must bear one another’s burdens.

It reminds me of the old football coach’s speech to his team about being committed, not just involved. “It’s like ham and eggs, boys. The chicken is involved, the pig is committed!” Recently, a big time Hollywood actor demonstrated beautifully the difference between being involved and being committed.

An off-screen female interviewer asked the actor about the kerfuffle in Hollywood on the issue of equal pay for female actors. His response was just so serious and such gold: “There is a lot of discussion about it and a lot of healthy and necessary discussion about it because the disparity is sometimes . . . disgraceful.”

“How do you think we can move past that?” she asked.

“We’re starting. It’s starting with these extraordinary actresses, these brave ladies, and we, as men, you know, we’ve got to be a part of it. We started it. So we have to be part of the solution.”

Then she got personal. “So would you take a pay cut to kind of equal things out.”

“No. Pay cut? No, no, no, no, no. That’s going too far. No. There has to be parity; there just has to be.”

The issue is easy for him when it doesn’t affect him, but as soon as it costs him something, it’s a different story. The Corinthians experienced that as fully as anyone. The whole letter of 1 Corinthians is a series of responses from Paul to the congregation he founded dealing with boundary questions. And over and over again, what Paul does is say, this is not just about the issue, it’s about your relationships with one another. It’s about the community, and friendship, and walking together, and suffering with one another, and all those things. That’s what church is about.

On this issue of idol meat, Paul will eventually, by the end of chapter 10, give practical advice. When you’re at your neighbor’s house, eat whatever’s in front of you. When you’re at the grocery store, don’t worry about where it comes from, just enjoy. But if someone puts it right in your face and says, this has been offered in sacrifice, then politely pass. All of that is interesting and helpful I guess, but here’s the thing that really grabs my attention: it took him 3 chapters to say something that simple.

For three chapters, he’s trying to get them to see something else that’s more important than this issue, even though that’s the burning question of their day. It’s like the Apostle is saying: the Gospel is not just about gaining knowledge on the question you’re asking. It’s about forming us to ask the bigger question: how do we love one another? Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up. They want to know about eating, so he’ll end by leading us by the end of chapter 11 to the church’s table where the church’s sacrifice is laid out, not of meat, but of bread, and wine, and our sins, and in remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice. He’ll bring us here for the ultimate reminder of who we are.

But first, he uses every indirect angle he can to try to help the church see that Christianity is not foremost about what you know; it’s about how you love, and that it’s not just about what is happening in you and to you. It’s about that, but even more it’s about what’s happening in and to the people around you at the Table of the Lord.

We may have lost awareness of just how radical this is: that if you take this bread and this cup, your life is not your own, not just your own anyhow. Every other person, at least every person in the church, holds part of the mortgage on your life. It is a false and dangerous dualism when we say, what I do, if it only affects me, is fine as long as it doesn’t affect anyone else. We belong to one another. Everything we do affects others, whether we can see it or not. If that seems like a burden too much to bear, it is, for sure. It would paralyze a person not to be able to make any decision or take any action until every other person were considered for how it might or might not affect them. It would be impossible.

And yet, to lean into this is what is meant by community, by friendship, by love . . . all the things that church is supposed to mean. What binds us together is not perfect scruples that cause no one any trouble. There is a 3-strand cord that binds us in love. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. One strand of the cord is trust. With trust, we can lean on one another for support and guidance. The second strand is grace. By grace we lighten one another’s burdens as Christ bears us all up. We learn it’s ok to fall. The third strand is suffering. We *suffer with* one another; this is the Greek word from which comes our word sympathy, and it’s a word Paul will come to in chapter 12 when he says, “God has so composed the body . . . If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

This cord of truth, grace, and suffering binds us closer together in love. This cord weaves through all these chapters. This cord weaves through the gospel. It weaves around us still today.

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