

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

"I will never eat meat." I'm quoting there. There is no way I am living in the same town as Doe's and being a vegetarian. And St. Paul isn't advocating vegetarianism, either. Not exactly. It helps to remember that when Paul was writing this letter to the people in Corinth, he wasn't writing the Bible. It was a letter. Later generations felt it to be inspired by God and worth reading even if one didn't live in Corinth in the First Century. But Paul isn't writing a treatise on how to live a Christian life. He is answering specific questions from specific people in a specific place at a specific time in history. That is important to keep in mind as we look at this and other Pauline epistles.

Specificity aside, I do believe Paul's writing to have been inspired, and I believe it to have relevance to us here today, but not at strictly literal level. We would not be furthering God's kingdom by insisting on a ban on meat, for example. While we only have Paul's response, in this case it is fairly easy to discern the question. In First Century Corinth, the only source for meat – if you weren't equipped to harvest it yourself – was from the various temples. People would bring in their sacrifices, and what the priests didn't use would be offered for sale to the people. But it got more complicated because the meat was sold in the market places, and there was no way to tell whether a particular hunk of beast was from a temple or from a farm. There was no FDA labeling.

To complicate matters even further, while the wealthier members of the church in Corinth could perhaps pick and choose their meat options, the poorer ones did not have that luxury. If they were to ever have a bit of meat in their diet, it would have to come from one of the public feasts, and they were held almost exclusively in honor of one of the idols. So it was not just a matter of personal piety. It also was a source of division in a church that already had issues over who had been baptized by whom.

In his response, St Paul acknowledges the truth of those who felt free to eat meat sacrificed to idols: Since those gods didn't really exist, what did it matter? At the same time, he admonishes those folks to remember that others in their midst felt very strongly about the issue. It was wrong to use one's freedom in Christ in a way that caused others harm. It was not just a matter of offending someone else. Paul saw a danger in some folks of going from it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols to maybe it's okay to sacrifice to idols. There is no way of telling how strong a temptation this may have been, but it seems to be Paul's concern.

The upshot of all of this is that it is the responsibility of the one who is more comfortable with interacting with the world not to lead those who are less secure into doing something wrong, to the point of abstaining from whatever practice might be in question. In the case of today's reading, the eating of meat.

I grew up in a tradition that, at least to my limited perspective, seemed to live in fear of the slippery slope. While a particular activity in and of itself could be okay, it should be avoided because of what it could lead to. Dancing was the classic example. I went to Mississippi College, not because it is a Baptists school, but because they offered me the best scholarship. Fortunately, my first night on campus I found a group of like-minded peers and we suffered through the next four years together. One of the things that MC frowned upon was dances. It was all right for the social organizations on campus to have dances, just not on campus. We held a lot of dances at the local Methodist gym. One time my particular social organization got in trouble because we put up a sign at a football game advertizing a "Victory Party" after the game. Someone objecting to the word "party." Rhythmic foot fellowship was the prevailing term.

Now, the powers that be had a point. There were some shenanigans at times at these events. Not by me, of course. But some people could not handle their freedom very well. It is entirely possible to abuse the freedom we have in Christ. Does that mean that the freedom should not be enjoyed by anyone? If so, what would be the point? You are perfectly free to do thus and so, but don't do it because it could lead to something worse.

The reason I am an Episcopalian is because of the freedom I find being an Episcopalian. It's not as though I lead some kind of hedonistic lifestyle. It's that we don't get hung up on a lot of things that really aren't that important. Rather than frown on dancing, we usually have a dance at our diocesan council meeting. Instead of preaching on the evils of alcohol, well, have you seen our collection of wine glasses? We don't see asking tough questions about our religion as a danger to our faith – it is essential to our faith.

That being said, I know that as a convert from a repressive form of Christianity to a more progressive one, I am sorely tempted to flaunt my freedom in the face of my more ... I am not really sure what word wouldn't seem condescending here. St. Paul used "weak." It is something with which I struggle, particularly when leaders in those other traditions call into question my devotion to the Lord Christ because I do not share their understanding of what he taught. I am all for live and let live, but sometimes it is difficult. Our Lord does not require that his followers be narrow-minded, racist, bigoted, judgmental, homophobic, misogynistic, reactionary, paranoid, fear-mongering, Islamophobic, pro-war, pro-gun, anti-Semitic white people. But to hear some people talk, that is exactly what it means to be a "real" Christian.

I know. I have issues. I'm working on it. In the mean time, it is good to hear what Paul is saying. We are all imperfect in our devotion to God. But it is on us to recognize when our actions are leading others astray. It is on us to be aware of the fact that we are all in this together. We are not allowed – I am not allowed – to feel superior to others because of our differing understandings of the best way to follow Christ. I am called to be forgiving and to trust that God can work through anyone God chooses, even ... me. So, I will eat meat, but I won't do it in front of you if it bothers you. And we all need to take care that, in the words of St. Paul, "this liberty of [ours] does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Ultimately, what draws us together is far greater than what might seem to separate us for now.