

“Good Eats”
A Sermon from the Front Pew of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Matt Matthews
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A Super Bowl party might include nachos covered with refried black beans, ground beef, black olives, Mexican cheese, cream cheese, fresh guacamole with lemon, cilantro, lime, and mint, strips of grilled skirt steak, and jalapenos.^[1]

Lunch *today* might include sea scallops pan fried in olive oil sprinkled with lime and orange zest, chopped sage, and cracked white pepper served with or without an Alfredo sauce over whole wheat pasta.

Some simple meals don't cost much. Beans and rice, for example. Frozen pizza. Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, and onions on a sesame seed bun, 99-cents at McDonalds.

Food is good. It is a necessity and sometimes a delight—my mother's ice cream cake, for example, both necessity and delight. Food is a symbol of hospitality and, sometimes, of celebration. But some food stands in the way of hospitality. A Hindu friend, probably, would not like a Big Mac. An alcoholic sister-in-law wouldn't appreciate a frozen strawberry margarita. Somebody with an abscessed tooth would cringe if you offered popcorn or peanut brittle. A mother-in-law allergic to shellfish would blow up like a balloon after just one fried Chincoteague oyster. A heart patient or diabetic should shy away from even a small slice of homemade chess pie.

“Good eats” can be bad.

In the days long before anyone knew much about nutrition, the Apostle Paul understands this. Here he is addressing a concern of some in the church at Corinth. Is it okay for a Christian to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols? Yes. It's fine. Meat is meat. However, not everyone believed that. Some believed that to eat food that had been sacrificed in an idol temple was bad for the soul. And to eat such meat was kind of like turning away from God, a sign of faithlessness, something to be ashamed of, and not very Christian.

If Paul were to eat meat from the local heathen temple, it would not only be a turn-off to some in the church in Corinth, it might confuse them, so much so that their faith might be hampered. A bit of tenderloin might be a meal to you, but to someone else, it might be, says Paul, a “stumbling block.” If those with a weak faith see a believer eat a burger from the temple, their faith might be, says Paul, “destroyed.”

So, Paul is clear. If eating meat offered to idols will hurt somebody in the church, don't eat meat in front of them. This isn't about first-century “political correctness;” it's about love. Don't do something that will lead your sister or brother astray. If serving a certain kind of meat at your table would harm your brother, serve broccoli instead. Or tofu. It's not about the *food* on the table so much as it is about the *love* around the table.

Paul is reminding the church not to “major in the minors.” Eating meat sacrificed to idols is a minor thing. However, if it hurts somebody else, don't. Because hurting others is a major thing.

We could use some of this generosity of spirit in our culture today. Our views on politics or religion, the teams we root for (go Chiefs!), the allegiances we have to one group or the other—all of these things, while important, are not nearly as important as our willingness to love and nurture and serve one another. Meat sacrificed to idols is not at the heart of the matter; loving and nurturing one another is. Conservative versus liberal is not essential. Old school versus new school is not. Blue versus red is not. Paul in the church never have and never will completely agree on stuff like that.

Love is the heart of the matter.

Why does Paul insist that we take such good care of the ties that bind us together? Why do we nurture one another so tenderly? Why, so often, are we willing to swallow our pride? Why are we constantly sensitive to the needs of others? The reason? Because we are nothing less than the body of Jesus Christ on earth. If the ankle hurts, the whole body limps. Caring for the body matters.

We ask our Elders and Deacons this question when we install them: “Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?” That's a good question for all of us.

If the answer to that question is “yes,” then we agree to be attentive to those with whom we live and serve. Figuratively speaking, when it’s our turn to cook, that may mean we serve a rack of barbeque ribs for some, or broccoli casserole and fried tofu for others. And of course, it’s not about what we cook in the kitchen. It’s about how we serve *from the heart*.

May God help us all serve like that.

AMEN

^[1] A summer birthday cake might begin with an angel food cake cut into three layers. Fill one layer with softened Ben and Jerry’s “Cherry Garcia” ice cream. Fill the next layer with softened mint chocolate chip ice cream. Fill the final layer with raspberry sorbet. Stack the cake together, slather with real whipped cream. Cover. Refreeze. Serve with a cherry on top.