

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, January 28, 2024
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Friends, the word of the Lord has come to me, and that word has declared – we are to go meatless for Lent. All of Lent – all 40 days. You can have meat on Sundays since it the traditional loophole day, not included in the 40. Why? – well since the Lord really loves to give thorough explanations, I asked and God told me

Raising meat is incredibly hard on the land and affordable meat sources most often do not treat animals ethically; we have Christians among us that are disheartened by our poor care of God's creation and they are doubting our faithfulness by continuing to eat meat as frequently as we do. They think the revolution of the meat production industry could start here with this act together.

Who would seriously consider it? Now what's your hesitancy

- You doubt God's communicate with me, okay – what about the reasons?
- You already ethically source most of your meat so don't think it makes sense for you?
- You don't think giving up meat for just 40 days will make a difference in the meat production industry or care of God's creation. Fair point.
- You want to know how many people are discouraged by our meat-eating ways? – 10% of the room – is that enough to do it for?

No need to raise your hands, but ask yourself, at the end of the day, whether you are convinced or not that it would help our community live more faithfully in Lent, just wouldn't do it for the simple reason that you love meat.

So before people start getting up and leaving, or just leaving in their minds, or my husband gets really anxious about where this is going – this is not our communal Lent project. It's a thought exercise to help you feel the discomfort that Paul's audience did in hearing his words in the first reading today.

Just like this thought exercise, Paul is talking about giving up meat too, but isn't really talking about giving up meat. He's talking about how we might gauge the impact of our actions on the lives of others and how we might use that impact as a reason to restrict our own behavior.

Here's the background. The issue of eating meat that comes from temples is a re-occurring one in Paul's letters; they ate far less meat than we do today, but enjoyed it just as much. Some sources of meat came from the temple sacrifice to other gods and so debate surrounded whether Christians should eat that. The "knowledgeable" Christians argued that there are no other gods, so it doesn't matter that this meat is tainted by idols because these other gods don't exist.

However, there are Christians "weaker in conscience" or have not through this issue and are really bothered by eating meat tainted by idol worship. To give you a visceral sense, it's like if someone brought Chipotle to your house, and you asked where it came from, and they said, oh it's leftovers from a Satanic ritual I came across this afternoon; they were giving it away in the

park.¹ You know it's not worshipping Satan to eat it, there's nothing wrong with the food, but it feels icky to eat it. So one group says, hey it's Chipotle, let's eat, and the other group says, people blessed it in the name of Satan, you can't eat that.

Paul actually agrees with the beliefs of the meat eaters. That other god, doesn't exist, so it doesn't matter. It causes God no offense. However, Paul cares about something else more. Paul cares about how it's affecting those in the church that get the icky feeling, and the division that is causing.

Paul never conceives of the Christian as an independent individual whose decisions only affect themselves. He does not take a live and let live attitude. Christians are first and foremost involved in a community; they are part of a network of relationships that connect them to other Christ followers. This interconnectedness and what builds it up and what weakens it is the driver for Paul's teaching here. Even if one knows that eating meat sacrificed to idols is NOT a problem, one should not place one's correct knowledge above its impact. The unity of the community is more important. Caring for others who have a differing opinions, even if they are wrong, who are hurt by what you are doing is more important than living into your own.

¹ Thanks to Frank L.Couch in his commentary for suggesting a comparison of food from a Satanic ritual

Now there's a caveat to that. We are not meant to quell all our personal opinions to care for those who feel threatened by them. Sometimes teachings like this are used among Christians to maintain the status quo and prevent conflict over things that are worthy of conflict. If you believe in doing something because it is about living into God's love for you or for others, and someone else disagrees and it causes division, that's worthy of division and conflict to be worked through not avoided. But if it's a question of being right on something that isn't integral to your living of God's love (like eating meat) or caring for someone who that act is hard to swallow, caring for the other, love wins.

Here's another example that has nothing to do with meat. It's a personal example. I really enjoy cussing. It is a way to express my feelings that doesn't hurt anyone. I actually cuss more when I'm happy than when I'm angry – it's a way to add a little drama and color. Jesus and I have talked about it, he's not offended. To my knowledge, I have never cussed in a sermon, and perhaps a mic has caught me once or twice during a mistake in worship, but it is something I consciously work to avoid when I'm in front of others professionally. At home, with friends, I cuss freely. Now the in-between spaces, with staff, with lay leaders at church I work with a lot, I struggle because I'm feeling comfortable enough that I'm not on guard to watch myself, but also, I wouldn't want my language to be a reason that they step away from me. It may be fine with me, but not with them. So I apologize, I feel guilty, I try to do better. Not because I think what I'm doing is bad, but because I worry that the impact could be detrimental to our relationships. And the relationships are far more important than the joy I get from using particular words that are just words. That's a way it looks like to choose love over knowledge in the way Paul is teaching today.

Friends we are in the year of our Lord 2024, and have another election cycle upon us, and since 2024 is looking a whole lot like 2016, (2020 many of us had far less interactions with those who differed or didn't differ from us) we know the challenge before us. A challenge we are most likely to face in the coming year is not whether or not to abstain from meat, but when to choose love over knowledge. When to step towards building up the relationships over convincing the other of how right we are. Even with, and maybe even more with, relationships where love doesn't yet have deep roots. The acquaintance, the co-worker . . . when is being right in a discussion not worth the weakening of the relationship. And. . . and when is it worth it, to discern when the knowledge is so linked to God's love that it is worthy of wading into conflict and how to do that lovingly. For without love, our knowledge is weak even if it's right.

Paul spoke many words about love, but his most famous are these: Love is patient. Love is kind. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. He wasn't talking to a couple soon to be married; he was talking to us. To Christians. Reminding us that love, love takes strength and skill and persistence, and it is what has saved us and will save us, and it is worth sacrificing being right, and it's worth division and conflict, it is worth everything. Even God laying down his life so that in rising again, God declares in a way the world continues to hear 2000 years later, Love wins.

Let us practice love first, before all else, and when we fall short, repent and try again another day, another month, another year.