

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 4th Sunday after Epiphany, February 1, 2015

**You Are What You Eat --- Or Are You?**

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February 1, 2015

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Do some people seem to worship food instead of God? It certainly seems that way at times. Consider that over one-third of the people in the United States are significantly overweight and the problem is growing. We have a sedentary lifestyle fueled by high calorie non-nutritious fast food. We spend a major portion of our budgets "eating out", particularly at fast food restaurants. Even many of those in poverty become trapped in this cycle of poor nutrition. The problem continues to grow. We are what we eat --- or are we?

As the epidemic of obesity is increasing, church membership and the support of the work of God is declining. Where is our sense of priorities? Ask any child who Ronald McDonald is and they can tell you immediately. Ask them who Jesus is, and many will not know. Is Ronald McDonald a new god?

No, he is not. Ronald McDonald and his ilk, Wendy, Col. Sanders and others, are idols to whom too much of today's family budget is sacrificed instead of eating nutritious food prepared at home.

Now, don't get me wrong. There is certainly nothing wrong with an occasional meal at a fast food restaurant but, when it becomes an everyday event, our priorities are very misplaced. We are worshipping the idols of advertising, convenience and our sedentary lifestyles.

In a way, this kind of idol worship is what Paul is talking about in today's epistle reading from 1 Corinthians.

In the ancient world, food was commonly offered to idols and in Corinth idol worship and sacrifices were common. The people, even those who were Christians, were accustomed to idols and to the ritual sacrifices of animals to them.

After a ceremony worshipping these idols, the sacrifices were customarily eaten or sold to others. But what if you ate of the sacrificed food? Was it OK or did you become what you ate? Could Christians eat of this food or were they defiling Christ by

partaking of sacrifices to idols, to false gods?

That was the debate in today's scripture reading. Was it OK to eat of food sacrificed to idols or not? It is similar to the question that I raised at the start of this message --- is it OK to eat at the table of Ronald McDonald, or Wendy or Col. Sanders?

Paul answers the question this way: *"Some people are so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do."* (NIV)

The Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary puts it this way: *"Food does not bring us near to God. The partaking of food offered to idols makes no difference to the standing of a Christian before God. It is the attitude with which a ... believer is involved with such meals that is significant."*

*"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak."*

Paul's concern is that eating meat which was offered to idols might lead some to relapse into paganism. As Perry Biddle put it, *"To eat this meal may be a morally indifferent act for some, but to others the circumstances make the act a sin against a weaker Christian."* (Preaching the Lectionary, A Workbook for Year B)

Walter Bruggemann, et al, have said, *"Notice first that within the Christian community love is to take precedence over the exercise of individual freedoms. Paul understands the theology of those who see no problem in eating the food that has been associated with idols and to a point agrees with it. Idols do not really exist, and 'for us there is one God ... and one Lord, Jesus Christ.' But there is the matter of those who have not yet integrated that theology into their psyches, whose heads might agree but whose hearts are still worried about idols. They cannot be ignored or run over. Love demands that their feelings, no matter how dated, be taken seriously, lest they too join in the meals and end up violating their own consciences."* (Texts for Preaching – Year B)

Paul is advising the Corinthians, and us, that one size does not fit all. For the strong Christian there was no problem in eating food which was sacrificed to idols. They would not become what they ate. For the weak, however, they might backslide to idol worship and paganism.

Just as there is no problem with most of us having an occasional high calorie meal at a fast food restaurant, for the weak or those who can't really afford it, it can become a habit and can potentially contribute to poverty or obesity. In that case, they do become what they eat.

Paul reminds us that there are different levels of maturity. Some of us have no problems in either regard but others do. Paul advises us to think less of our own *“individual freedom in Christ and to think more of others’ lack of knowledge ... Adopting such a stance will inevitably mean that the Christian imposes self-restraints, and does so willingly ... (as) this is a small price to pay for the sake of a weaker companion in Christ.”* (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Fred B. Craddock, et al)

We are not what we eat but we are what we believe. Showing others the advantages of a proper diet can help them to avoid or minimize eating things which are not good for them. Sharing our faith with others can strengthen their faith and even bring those with no faith to Christ. As Christians we need to be good examples, both in diet and in faith.

**Amen.**