

**Epiphany 4: 1/28/18**  
**St. Paul: Luxemburg, WI**  
**Text: I Corinthians 8**  
**Theme: To eat or not to eat**

A couple of summers ago I took my family out to New York while on vacation. I must say that for my young children who have been raised in Midwestern towns all of their lives that it was, to say the least, a somewhat "cosmopolitan" experience. They saw things that were new to them from tall skyscrapers, street performers, and a cowboy dressed with a guitar. When it came time to feed them, I naturally got them a hotdog from one of the many vendors on the streets. Why? Because it was cheap! Not many people can say that they fed a family of five for twenty two dollars in downtown New York. When looking at various street vendors, restaurants, and carry out menus, my wife noticed that some of the places had a particular label on them and wondered what it meant. Well, it was a religious seal of sorts. It was saying that the hotdogs had been prepared in such a way that they contained no pork or various other things that are supposed to be forbidden in some religions.

Now, I ate my hotdog without giving it the slightest thought. Why? Because I'm a Christian! I know that Jesus suffered and died for my sins on the cross. When He rose

from the dead, He accomplished my salvation. I know that because of what Jesus has done for me I'm going to one day be with Him in heaven. My being right with God does not depend on what I eat or don't eat. That's one of the blessings of being a Christian. I can eat or drink anything that I want. My salvation does not depend on me sacrificing pork chops, steak on Fridays, alcohol, or anything else. My salvation doesn't depend on anything that I sacrifice. My salvation depends on Christ sacrificing Himself on the cross for my sins.

That is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in our text for this morning. The Apostle Paul is talking about a particular historical situation, but he is also giving us a timeless teaching for our lives as Christians. Paul is writing to the Christians in the city of Corinth. You see Corinth in Paul's time was filled with all kinds of temples to false gods. These temples would have been filled with all kinds of idols. There would have been statues of false gods that people actually worshipped. You see people would go to these temples for these idols and they would make sacrifices. They would bring meat, and the meat was typically divided in three ways. A third of the meat was left at the altar for the false god. A third would be

eaten by the people who worshipped there, and a third would then be sold in the market place.

You see it was the last part that caused some real problems for the Christians in Paul's day. This meat would be sold in the meat markets. Just imagine going to the Pig or to Stodola's and having meat on sale that had been offered up to an idol? In fact, in Paul's day, some scholars have suggested that it would have been impossible to have eaten meat if you didn't buy meat that had been involved in idol worship. That's how common the practice was. What would you do? Would you buy it and eat it or not? Well, my tendency is to think that Lutherans would do the same thing they do on Friday evenings when there's a special on fish. They would eat it. Not because of any theological reasons but because they're cheap.

Well, what does Paul tell the people of Corinth that they should do? He tells them that they know that an idol is nothing. He tells them that they know that there is only one God: the Triune God. They know that all of these other gods that the people are worshipping are not gods at all. He says, "Who cares if someone offered up the meat as a sacrifice to an idol?" Paul is saying that "if it's a good cut of beef and you can get it cheap, go ahead and eat it." Paul is saying to the Corinthians that they know that

they're salvation doesn't depend on what they eat or don't eat. They're salvation depends on what Jesus did for them.

In fact, Paul is telling us that there may be times when we are obligated to eat. You see there are times when it is necessary for you to give witness to your Christian freedom. There may be times when it is necessary for you to make it clear to people that your salvation does not depend on what you eat or don't eat. I'll give you a couple of examples. When I studied in Jerusalem in college, the school I was sent to for that semester was not Lutheran. My roommate and I were the only two Lutherans in the school. I knew up front that there would be a lot of people who would look down on us if we ever touched a drop of alcohol. There was one girl in particular who was on the other side of our apartment building who believed that it was a mortal sin to touch alcohol. She was not from Wisconsin.

We had been in Jerusalem for a few days when she arrived. So, we were showing her around the neighborhood her first morning there. We stopped off at a shop to get a drink. My roommate was not as confrontational as me on such things. He ordered a Coke. I ordered a Maccabee. That's Israeli beer. I had immediately committed two mortal sins in this girl's eyes. I was drinking alcohol,

and I was drinking alcohol at nine in the morning. I wanted to make my point. I wanted to make it very clear to her that she could look down on me all she wanted, but I would not let her infringe on my Christian freedom.

I'll give you one more example. Why do we baptize by pouring water at a font in the Lutheran Church? You know the answer from your confirmation instruction. Part of it is convenience. We don't have room for a swimming pool up here. But there is another more important reason. You see there are those who say that you must immerse, dunk, a person under water for the baptism to be effective. But you see that's a dangerous teaching. It suggests that the effectiveness depends on what we do or the amount of water we use. We understand that the power of Baptism lies in God's Word, not the amount of water. It is God's Word connected to the water that makes the Baptism effective. When God's Word is connected to the water, it enters you into Jesus' death and resurrection. So, we pour water to give witness to that important theological truth.

Paul is telling you that there are times when you should eat. But Paul is also telling you that there are times when you should not eat. Paul is telling you that you are supposed to be concerned about your fellow believers. You are to be concerned about those who are

weak in their faith. You are to be concerned about those who are not as spiritually mature as you are. Let's go back to my eating that hot dog in New York City. What if someone saw me eating that hot dog who knew who I was? What if someone who was weak in their faith in Jesus thought that I was worshipping some other God than the Triune God by what I was eating? Would it then be right for me to eat what I wanted? No! Paul talks to the Corinthians about people who are weak in their faith seeing those who are strong in their faith eating meat offered to an idol. Those who are weak in their faith might be spiritually harmed.

Paul is saying to the Corinthians that they might have to give up eating meat altogether for the sake of their fellow believers. Now, that's quite a sacrifice, isn't it? Can you imagine having to give up eating meat out of concern for your fellow believers? We can't really imagine it can we? The reason we can't is because so often times in churches today we aren't driven by concern for those around us. To often in churches, we are driven by our own interests and being able to do what we want. In other words, we tend to be focused on ourselves and not others.

Paul here gives us a timeless teaching. We don't see meat being sold at local meat markets today that has been

used in the worship of idols. You won't go down to Festival and see a sirloin steak that is marked as having been used in temple worship. However, the principle that Paul gives us still applies in so many situations in our lives as Christians. Let's go back to the example of alcohol. You are free to drink beer if you desire. The Bible condemns drunkenness not alcohol. You are free to drink but does that mean that it would be okay for you to crack open a beer at an AA meeting? You see that wouldn't show proper concern for your fellow Christians would it?

I remember years ago being at a pastor's conference. At the end of the evening session, many of the attendees headed down to the hotel bar to wash down the taste of the dry as dust conference. I didn't have a problem with any of these pastors heading down for a beer. What I had a problem with was the fact that many of them were wearing their clerical collars while they sat at the bar. There was a wide mix of people in that bar who were staring at these pastors. I asked these pastors if they thought this was a good idea. They said that they were exercising their Christian freedom. I told them they were potentially harming the faith of those who were weak in their faith and were certainly giving a poor public witness.

When we getting ready for the Reformation Festival, the question came up about serving beer at it. I can't say that there would have necessarily been anything wrong with it. After all, Luther certainly drank beer, and I guess it would have been a fitting reflection of the German heritage. I said I would send it to the council. During the discussion, the issue was raised about whether or not there would be people at the event who struggle with alcohol. Statistically, we know that there would be a fair number there. I would suggest that you talk to someone who struggles with alcohol sometime. Talk to them about what it's like to live in a society where alcohol is everywhere and drinking is constantly encouraged. You see it's one thing for someone who struggles with alcohol to stay away from the bars where they expect to come across it. But the question was raised as to what does it say to them when they are confronted with it at church? The conclusion of the discussion was that while there's nothing wrong with serving beer that there might be something wrong with serving it at church. It could harm someone's faith. You see if you want to drink God gives you places like Janda's to go do that at. You see while it would not have been wrong for people to drink beer it was decided that we would put the good of others first.

So, the teaching that Paul gives us on whether to eat or not to eat is not a difficult one. We are free to eat or drink whatever we want. However, we are motivated first and foremost by what is good for our fellow believers. It's an easy teaching but one that is often not followed. Why? Because we so often think only about ourselves. Our sin enslaves us and we cannot free ourselves by what we eat or don't eat. How wonderful it is to know that Jesus focused perfectly on others. He ate bread with the one who would betray Him and drank the cup of suffering that your sins deserve. He grants you forgiveness and frees you from your sin. We live our lives knowing that our salvation is accomplished, and we want others to be pointed to Jesus as well. The good news of Jesus guides us in our lives. That is what guides you on whether to eat or not to eat.

Amen!!!