

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
The Feast of a Grateful Community
1 Corinthians 8
January 31, 2021

This morning's New Testament reading, the Epistle reading, is from the eighth chapter of First Corinthians. This may be one of those times when it is most helpful to have a bible with you for the sermon, if you'd like to do that. You may get more out of it if you have one. The 8th chapter of 1st Corinthians is, I'm going to guess, not necessarily the most familiar passage of scripture to you, and perhaps, not even among the most beloved.

See, the 8th chapter of 1st Corinthians is one that you kind of pass by reading through Corinthians on your way to bigger, grander destinations. Think of it like this, it's like you're traveling down the highway, and as verse after verse goes by in 1st Corinthians, it's like mile markers clicking past. You're heading to your destination, which for everybody reading 1st Corinthians is chapter 13—the love chapter, and you're trying to get there. And that's kind of like the Austin of 1st Corinthians. You know, that's where you're trying to get to, that's your destination for the weekend.

Along the way, you see an exit sign to chapter 8. It's kind of the Waco of 1st Corinthians, because, you just sort of think, "I'm not going to stop there. I'm just going to keep on going to where I want to get to, which is 1st Corinthians 13—all about love." You think that's where you're trying to go. That's the hill country—the majestic hill country of the book, but if you just pass by too quickly, you miss so much. And so, like many of those who have come before you in recent days, you might want to take the exit to the chapter 8 of 1st Corinthians and find that there is a lot more there than you may have realized every time you've just passed on by.

But the truth is, that when you take that exit off the highway, you've entered a geography that is complex. Chapter 8's syntax, its grammar, its sentence structure—it's like a city where every street is a one-way street, and they're all under construction at the exact same time. That's this chapter. But, if you can get past that, even if you go down a few one-way streets the wrong direction, and let's be honest, all these people coming to town are doing that all the time. If you can get past that, what you find is that is quite a wonderful thing. And so, I'd like to offer a kind of road map this morning to a chapter that we might tend to overlook, but is worth exiting the highway and worth navigating to find the riches and the teaching that are here in this chapter.

One reason you might pass it by is because the exit sign on the highway to chapter 8 announces from the very beginning this chapter is about food sacrificed to idols. And if that is all you know, it's easy just to stay on the highway and keep going right on to love. Because you're interested in that, but you're probably not interested in the question of food sacrificed to idols. But, get off the highway. There's more here than meets the eye.

First Corinthians 8 is about whether Christians can eat food sacrificed to idols. I know that's probably not your pressing concern this morning, but apparently, in the 1st century world it was a big issue for the small group of 1st generation Christians. And you can see why. They were all new converts to Jesus, they all were doing church for the first time, and they all had to navigate a culture all around them that challenged their faith and way of life just simply by its existence.

To live in Corinth, a small town in Greece, and eat food was to be part of the system of temple sacrifices and feasts. This is not some niche, vague temptation to strange idol worship deep in a forest at midnight on a Saturday. This is the normal way of being. This is the civil religion of how the culture functioned all around them. So, what's a Christian to do? Go along as there's nothing different about the way you understand the world? Retreat to a Christian compound in the hills? What do you do? A person's gotta eat. I remember an old farmer talked to me about some issue we were discussing about which I'd been particularly self-righteous. He said, "Preacher, you can't eat prayer." He's right. What is a 1st Century Christian to do when almost all the food they have contact with has some association with these temples to idols?

The Corinthians had two things to say about this. They wrote them in a letter that they sent to Paul. We don't have that letter; it's long gone. Maybe someone will dig it out of the sand someday, but we don't know anything about that letter except where Paul quotes it back as he writes this letter to them, which we know as 1st Corinthians. They had two things to say to him that show up in this letter. First, in verse 4, what they say to him is "since we know there is only one God, and therefore all those idols are meaningless, no matter what anyone else says about them, then food sacrificed to them is no different from food prepared anywhere. So, we're free to eat it if we want." That was their argument in verse 4. The idols we know are meaningless because there's only one God, and because those idols are meaningless, any act of sacrificing food to meaningless idols doesn't mean anything. So therefore, it doesn't matter if the food has been sacrificed or not, we are free to eat it.

Paul responds, you're right, and I think he must have been pleased that they'd at least learned some theological principles from his time with them—founding this church and leading them to Christ. He says, you're right. There is only one God from whom and for whom we exist and one Lord Christ through whom we exist. But then he says you're wrong to believe that what you do is only determined by what you know. It's also determined by who you love and how you love. Not all your brothers and sisters in the church are as sure about God's singular sovereignty as some of you are. So, go easy. Be careful. Watch out for them. Knowledge puffs up, love builds up. That's when you know you're operating out of love. So this is Paul's basic principle that he lays out in chapter 8: responding to their claim about knowledge in saying that it isn't just about knowledge; it's also about love.

But the Corinthians weren't done yet with ideas about food sacrificed to idols. Their first argument was that idols don't matter. Verse 4. Their second argument is that food doesn't matter, verse 8. *"Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do."* I know that many English translations don't put quotes around this

verse, but I think they should be there. Some translations have them. These are their words, their argument, not Paul's. And it's a dangerous argument.

What makes it dangerous is that it's so close to sounding right. They knew that food sacrificed in temple rituals didn't bring people close to God whether it was done in Jerusalem, Athens, or Corinth. Christ's death and resurrection was the end of sacrifices. He was the high priest and the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In Christ, God was reconciling the world. That work is done; that victory is won. So, right: food sacrificed, food blessed by a temple priest doesn't have a particular role in bringing us close to God.

But they've gone too far in rejecting food in general as meaningless. And a century or so later, this kind of thinking will blossom into Gnosticism, one of the most persistent challenges to early Christianity. Gnosticism has a lot going on in it, too much to talk about here, but at heart it's this idea that things like food doesn't matter, that bodies don't matter, that the earth doesn't matter. In fact, it gets in the way of faith. In Gnosticism you have this split between spiritual things and material things. One is good; one is bad. For Gnosticism, faith is about transcending this body and this life. If that sounds a lot like Christianity to you, it's because so much of Christianity has been made to sound like Gnosticism. There's always been a gravitational force to Gnosticism that pulls Christians away from our incarnational faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

Consider their argument: Can food bring us close to God? They said no, absolutely not. But I believe food absolutely can bring us closer to God. And I think St. Paul thinks this, and so that's one reason I'm convinced verse 8 is in quotes. In their words, not his. Beginning here and through chapter 9, 10, 11, and into chapter 12, Paul weaves a complex discussion about a lot of things, but in the background of it all is the idea that our faith in Christ doesn't make materiality irrelevant or evil. It's all the more important how we relate to others, our bodies, our food, the earth. In chapter 11, Paul reminds them of the importance of the Lord's Supper. Then in Chapter 12, he teaches them: You are the body of Christ, and in Chapter 13, he will teach them and us how to love as God loves. Food leads to community leads to love. You could keep going if you want to see this through the rest of this book. Chapter 14 is about worship, and chapter 15 is about the glory and hope of the resurrection of Christ. So, food leads to community leads to love leads to worship leads us to the foot of the cross and the hope of the empty tomb.

Sounds great, sounds simple, but we've lived long enough in the complexities of life and the complexities of our bodies and of community and worship and love and food to know it's not that simple. Food doesn't always bring us close to God. Food that is eaten ungratefully, unmindfully, selfishly doesn't bring us somehow magically close to God. And that's often how we eat. Food systems that both overfeed and under nourish do not bring us close to God, and that's pretty much the food system we have today. Communities where some gorge while others go hungry do not bring us close to God, and that's the reality in American cities. Food eaten that gives us no connection to the soil or the squeal, the farmer or the field doesn't bring us closer to God, and that's the reality of the dominant and massive industrial food production that arose in the last half of the last century. Food and bodies can be the source of so much pain, confusion, shame, and hurt. And that's the pain so many people carry in their spirits

around food and how they feel about themselves when they eat and when they can't bring themselves to eat.

There's so much about food that doesn't bring us close to God, to faith, hope, love, delight, joy, justice, wholeness.

But it can.

When Israel dreamed of a promised land, they could almost taste milk and honey. Something sweet to eat and nourishing to drink—milk and honey, which means there are goats and bees, which means there's fields and flowers.

How many parables are about fields and flowers, farmers and seeds.

Food is one of our Lord's favorite images of the kingdom: the heavenly banquet, the communion table, grace of a few loaves and fishes and giving drink to the thirsty—all have to do with the hungry being fed and the feast of a grateful community.

I'm thinking of movies like *Babette's Feast* and the Hundred Mile Journey and the priest in *Big Night* who was raptured at the first taste of timpano. I'm thinking of those of you who faithfully serve our neighbors at the Gospel Café each month. And those of you who prepare space for our potlucks when we used to have them—and we will again. And those of you who go to the farmer's market because it's fun, but also as a spiritual discipline of eating locally. Those of you who tip your waitress more generously than you have to because she is serving you a meal, and that reminds you she is serving like Christ. And I'm thinking of those of you who grow veggies and love sharing them as much as eating them and those of you who compost your scraps so as little goes to waste as possible but returns to the circle of life. And those of you who fast in Lent and feast on holidays. You are all signs to me and to the world of God's Spirit at work in the world and food not sacrificed to idols, but lifted up to God on high.

Yes, eating with gratitude brings us close to God in thanksgiving and eating respectfully brings us close to lives and deaths of other members of creation and makes us more human in the web of creation. Sharing generously, with brothers and sisters around a table in the Body of Christ and making sure all have food to eat in every community—this is love of neighbor and that is close to God who said was hungry and you gave me something to eat

Food does matter, and it matters a lot. Truly men and women do not live on bread alone, but they do live on bread. You can't eat prayer, as I was once reminded. We do live on bread, and so let us make our bread a prayer.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky Farmer poet wrote a *Prayer After Eating*--

I have taken in the light
that quickened eye and leaf.

May my brain be bright with praise
 of what I eat, in the brief blaze
 of motion and of thought.
 May I be worthy of my meat.
 - Wendell Berry

Berry's prayer helps me imagine a scene in which every animal I've consumed in my life is lined up in front of me. Every farmer whose grown every green thing I've consumed is there too. Every person who has made my meals possible by picking, cooking, cleaning, serving. They're all there. Can you imagine what a scene would be in front of you? All of these are part of you through your food. The whole world is part of you through your food. Each of us is like a mini Noah's Ark holding in our being the vestiges of every creature whose life contributed to every meal we've ever eaten. We are not just part of the world. The world is part of each of us, the world God created and said "This is good." The world Jesus lived and died for and saves.

Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that an extraordinary gift that we are made for this? And that we are made like this?

We may not think we deal on a regular basis with food sacrificed to idols. Not our problem. But every day we eat only unto ourselves, the food is sacrificed for an idol of self-worship. But every time we eat with gratitude, generosity and love, we participate more fully in the world that God has placed us in and made us a part of. The food we eat and share becomes, in God's spirit, an act of grace and foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

It is an act of love through which we are built up in God from whom are all things and for whom we exist and in the Lord Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Let us taste and see the Lord is good.
 Let us pray that all may see the Lord is good.

Thanks be to God.