

## Causing Others to Sin

I Corinthians 8:1-12

February 1, 2009

Let me begin by noting that the sermon title this morning has nothing to do with the chili cookoff last night, although there was plenty of deliciously tempting chili to cause some of us to overeat.

Erma Bombeck developed a set of rules to guide her eating when she traveled. Her suggestions included such things as:

“Never eat anything you can’t pronounce.”

“Beware of food that is described as, ‘Some Americans say it tastes like chicken.’”

“If a country does not have one single head of cattle, no range and no cowboys, don’t order beef.”

“This is not time to be a sport. When they tell you how the skin of what you are eating makes wonderful shoes and handbags, leave it.”

“Resist anything that when dropped on the floor excites a dog.”

“In countries where men wear red-checkered tablecloths on their heads don’t order Italian.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s no question that food is important to us. It’s important both because it’s necessary in order for us to live **and** because there’s an element of pleasure in it – you know, eating with others and the actual food. Just think of the important moments we spend around a table of food – reunions, holiday gatherings, church potlucks, chili cookoffs, spaghetti dinners, holy communion. Food drives much of our economy as a nation – farmers, restaurants, schools, cafeterias, the fast food industry. And how many of us spend a few hours a week watching those food shows? – Paula Deen, Will Work For Food, Hell’s kitchen, the Barefoot Contessa, and my favorites: anything having to do with barbeque or ribfests. And then, because we live in this land of abundance and eat too much, there’s the dieting industry.

I heard a story recently of a doctor who decided to put one of his overweight patients on a diet. He told the man that he wanted him to eat regularly for two days and then skip a day. “I want you to follow this pattern for two weeks and then come back to see me. After two weeks you should lose five pounds. Got that? Eat two days and then skip a day.”

Two weeks later the man went back to the doctor for his appointment. He’d lost 20 pounds! Even the doctor was amazed. He asked, “You lost all this weight just by following my instructions?”

The man answered, “Yes, sir, and I’ll tell you what though, doc, I thought I was going to drop dead on that third day.”

The doctor asked, “From hunger?”

“No,” answered the man. “From all that skipping.”<sup>2</sup>

The church has always had a love/hate relationship with the consumption of food. Way back in the early church even there arose a disagreement about food consumption. In order to understand Paul's comments in this 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians and the next few chapters also we need to know what the concern was.

The issue was this: "was it OK to eat meat that had been offered to idols?" Offering animal sacrifices to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. There were both private and public sacrifices. No matter which setting it took place in, hardly ever was the entire animal thrown into the fire. Usually the sacrificing involved some token part of the animal.

As a result much of the animal was left over. In a private sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts – the token part offered in the sacrifice; the ribs, ham and left side of the face of the animal went to the priest; and the rest was received by the worshipping individual. This person then threw a feast in the name of the god to whom the small portion had been sacrificed.

The question that the Christians in Corinth faced was whether it was right to take part in these private parties that used meat offered to an idol? If persons were not allowed, they were going to be left out of many social occasions in the community.

Then there were times when the state held a sacrifice – public sacrifices. After the token part was sacrificed and the priest received his share, the balance was made available to the government leaders. What they didn't need or want apparently they sold to the markets in their area and the shop owners then sold it to the general public. Thus, when persons purchased meat from these butchers there was no way of knowing whether the meat had been part of a sacrifice to an idol or not.<sup>3</sup>

Nothing was ever easy to the Corinthian Christians. The congregation came deeply embroiled in an argument about whether it was proper to eat this meat or not. You see, some of those who had become Christians had formally worshiped the idols. They had taken part in the feasts following the sacrifices. And they wondered if it was OK for them to continue attending these parties after they became followers of Christ.

Some said, of course it was OK because everyone knew they no longer believed in the idols to which the sacrifices were made. The food and fellowship was still good, so what possible harm could there be in continuing to take part in the social life of the community.

So, in the Corinthian Church one side of the congregation said their new freedom in Christ meant it was OK to eat the meat because they didn't believe in the idols anyway and any such policy sounded an awful lot like the old legalism they knew Christ saved them from. Others felt there was something hypocritical about eating such meat.

Paul began his letter by appearing to take the side of the "strong" Corinthians – those who probably were the ones who wrote the original letter to him asking for his opinion. He affirmed them by pointing out the assertions they offered that he agreed with in theory. Yes, he concurred, "all of us possess knowledge" and part of this "knowledge" is that all baptized persons now possess the realization that "no idol ... really exists" and "there is no God but one." He further assured them of the rightness of their opinion that "food will not bring us close to God" and that "we are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." (I Corinthians 8:1-8)

But then, ... then he spelled out his concern that we need to guard against thinking too highly of our “knowledge” and remember that what it’s really all about – what the supreme test needs to be for us as a community of faith - is whether we build up the community or not – whether the decisions we make, the rules we decide to live our lives by, strengthen our relationships as a community of faith. He reminded the Corinthian Christians, as he does several other places in his letters to them, that love is what needs to guide our life together in the church.<sup>4</sup>

Paul then gave voice to what he believed to be the most relevant issue: “What if a new believer, still insecure in their faith, saw them eating food offered to idols and thought they still believed in idol-worship even after becoming Christians? Then these newer believers might fall back into worshipping idols themselves.” “So,” said St. Paul to the Christians in Corinth, “don’t let your superior understanding of faith cause you to be a stumbling block to others. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”<sup>5</sup>

Decision-making in the life of the church must always saddle up on the side of building up the community – encouraging one another – protecting the body of Christ from dissension. Knowledge about anything that is not tempered by the concern for others is one of the greatest threats to the church. It always has been and still is.

There was a swimmer from Guinea at the 2004 Sydney Olympic Games. Eric “the swimmer” Moussambani was a 22-year-old African that only learned how to swim the year before the Olympics. He practiced in a 20 meter pool without lane markers. He had never raced in anything beyond 50 meters. The International Olympic Committee invited athletes from poorer countries to participate in the games even though they didn’t meet the Olympic standards. The result was that Eric was entered in the 100 meter men’s freestyle event.

There were only three swimmers entered in Eric’s heat. The other two were disqualified because of false starts. So, Eric had the pool to himself. He was, to use the words used by an Associated Press writer in a story about the race, “charmingly inept.” He held his head above the water throughout the race and he fairly flailed as he tried to stay afloat. When he was just 10 meters from the wall he practically came to a stop. Many in the stands thought he was going to drown! Despite the fact that his time was over a minute slower than what he would need to qualify for the next level of competition the capacity crowd stood and cheered him on.

After what seemed like an eternity, the young African touched the wall – actually he clung onto it for dear life. After he caught his breath, he said through an interpreter, “I want to send hugs and kisses to the crowd. It was their cheering that kept me going.”<sup>6</sup>

Over and over again through the years persons have shared with me how important the community of faith was to their being able to make it despite the hardships they had to endure. Paul’s point in this text is that our ministry is one that needs to be guided by those things which will build us up as a community of faith – those things which involve our encouraging one another.

I love reading stories about when Larry Doby joined the Cleveland Indians as the first African-American to play for an American League team. Doby was a promising rookie in 1947. He was pretty tense and nervous the first time he batted though and swung at three pitches and missed them very badly. After striking out he slowly walked with his head down to the end of the bench where he then rested his head in his hands.

The next hitter was a player by the name of Joe Gordon. Now, Joe was an outstanding second baseman and had a particularly good record against the pitcher the Indians were facing that day. What happened next is the stuff

that makes for baseball legends. Joe Gordon went to the plate and he missed three pitches in a row by at least two feet each. Then he walked slowly to the end of the bench with his head down and sat down beside Larry Doby and put his head into his hands.

Did Joe Gordon strike out intentionally that day? We will never know for sure. But, it is interesting to note that every time Larry Doby took the field from that day on, he first picked up Joe Gordon's glove and tossed it to him.<sup>7</sup>

It takes caring that someone else succeeds, makes it good, to be a vital family of faith. Would you be surprised to learn that in some churches there actually are people who feel threatened when other people do well? You know, people who are jealous if anyone gets more recognition than they do? Thank goodness there are a great many more Joe Gordon types in the church.

You see, the folks in that pesky Corinthian church didn't really care about the weaker members of the congregation – the newer members – the converts. They believed themselves to be spiritually enlightened and thus didn't believe they needed to be concerned about whether meat had been sacrificed to an idol or not. "Since idol worship was a bunch of superstition anyway why waste a good steak?" was their attitude.

While Paul agreed that legalism was no longer part of the journey of faith he introduced a new test of whether we should do something – and that is whether it causes our brothers and sisters in the faith to sin. He said that the real acid test was our love for one another.

We are family – we have a responsibility for one another – we need to be careful not to live lives that cause others to sin.

And so, we come to celebrate a meal that helps us remember we are one in Christ – that what is important is that we encourage one another – we love one another – we rejoice in one another's faith.

1. Erma Bombeck, When You Look Like Your Passport Photo, It's Time to Go Home (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p. 174.
2. King Duncan, "Be Careful Which Entrée You Choose," Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
3. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Corinthians (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 71 – 72.
4. Leonard Sweet, "I Corinthians 8:1-13," Collected Works (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 1994), 0-000-1415.
5. King Duncan, "Better Ignorant Than Uncaring," Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
6. "My Daily Dose of Inspiration," <http://www.quietstones.com/mydailydose> via WIT and WISDOM™ as quoted by King Duncan, "Better Ignorant Than Uncaring."
7. Source Unknown as quoted by King Duncan, "Watch What You Eat," Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.