

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Epiphany 4

January 31, 2021

Sermon by Pastor Dan. Pautz

To eat, or not to eat, that is the question

—1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God. So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, 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. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

This letter is addressed to followers of Jesus, people who rejoiced in the grace of Christ, salvation, and forgiveness. In this eighth chapter Paul is not telling them how to be saved but how saved people should live and conduct themselves. The subject matter is not about justification but about sanctification. It addresses the issue, “To Eat or Not to Eat – That is the Question.”

My mother was facing a dilemma. What should she do? It was in the mid 1950’s on the small farm in Wisconsin during haying season. Up to this time the hay was hauled in loose. Some of you might remember the old hay loaders and the hay tracks in the hay barns. Haying this way was a lot of work and it was slow. You wanted to get the hay in before it got rained on. But our next-door neighbors – they were two brothers and were good neighbors - had purchased a baler and that made things much faster by far. My dad hired them to bale our hay. In those days you fed a good delicious farm cooked meal to family and any farm workers. Our neighbors sat down with us to eat.

The dilemma! “To Eat or Not to Eat – That is the Question.” It was Friday. Our neighbors were Catholic and, in those days, eating meat such as beef or pork on Friday was forbidden by their church and considered a sin. It was okay to eat fish but not regular meat. My parents knew it was not a sin to eat meat on Friday. It was a man-made law. Yet they loved and respected their neighbors. What should my mom make for dinner? She did not want them to do something that would have troubled their consciences. But she did not want to compromise as if serving meat was a sin. I’ll tell you what she did toward the end of this sermon.

That brings us to the thought of our sermon text this morning – “To Eat or Not to Eat That is the Question.” There is a dilemma in this sermon text from 1 Corinthians. There are some similarities to what my mom faced. Although it is not an exact parallel yet practical lessons can be learned. True, it had to do with eating food and meats. Some of the meat and food available had been offered on the altars of false gods. A portion of it was burned in the sacrifice, another portion was given to the priests of these false gods, and yet another portion went on sale at markets throughout the city. The question was whether it was sinful for Christians to buy and eat the food and meat that had been offered as sacrifices to false gods – and Corinth had many of them such as Apollos, Zeus, and Aphrodite. The Corinthian Christians wrote a letter to Paul about a number of matters and included was “To Eat or Not to Eat That is the Question.” Paul answered it. How would you have answered?

Paul’s answer in essence was “Yes, you can eat such food. It was not sinful. You have freedom; you have a right to eat it.” Here is how Paul approached the problem. “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.” What is Paul saying? The gods to whom the food and meat were sacrificed were nothing. They were non-existent. There is only one God. Even today people may have many gods such as Allah or Buddha or Mother Nature or Mother Earth but the only place such gods exist is in the mind and imagination of people. “For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things

came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." The food was being offered to non-existent gods. Paul is saying, "You have the freedom to eat such food." "But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do." Food and meat aren't going to make a difference one way or the other in your relationship with Jesus.

Yes, you have the right to eat such food. However – and this is a big however – however, there are a few caveats. Under certain circumstances do not insist upon using that right. Listen to what Paul wrote. "Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.... Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak..... So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall." The Corinthian Christians who had the correct view about eating food offered to idols had to be concerned about the consciences of weaker brothers and sisters whose consciences were bothered by such eating. Don't think simply about self, think also about others. In love you might not insist upon your right. A real key in all this is love for others and a concern especially about the wellbeing of the weak. And Paul reminded them that Jesus Christ died also for them. Don't in any way harm their faith in Jesus.

Now a word about conscience! Conscience has been defined as the voice God put in us that tells us what is right and wrong. It is a good thing. You don't want to go against your conscience. But make sure that your conscience is always programmed by God's Word. The conscience should bother us when we have done something sinful. But the conscience is not perfect. It can be abused. It can tell us that something is not a sin when God says it is. For example, think of the thief who continues to steal. At first his conscience might accuse him of wrongdoing but the more he steals, the less the conscience bothers him. The person who knows it is God's will to hear His Word – and in today's COVID-19 world either in church or online – might be bothered at first when he neglects that Word but then after awhile the conscience has been muzzled. Or a person who has abused his conscience by cussing all the time can easily get to the point when that conscience no longer blows a whistle when he cusses.

On the other hand the conscience can be so programmed that it says that something is sinful that is not sinful. Going back several decades ago in my younger days some people were being told it was sinful to eat meat on Fridays. But it is not sinful. Someone might say it is sinful to go to a non-Christian doctor or to shop in a store that is owned by an atheist. Years ago some thought it was sinful to dance. Yes, indeed, there are types of dancing today which obviously crosses into sin. Some taught that it was sinful to play cards. But not so!

Now how should we proceed? Think of these two things. Do not compromise your God-given rights, but don't always insist upon using them. In carrying this out, think also of another two things. 1) Your respect for God, and 2) Your love and concern for others.

Okay, let's travel back to my Mom and our farmhouse kitchen. It was a Friday and she was preparing the noon meal for neighbors who thought it was a sin to eat meat on Friday. If they did, their consciences would have accused them of sin. "To Eat or Not to Eat – That is the Question." My mom did not want to compromise the God-given freedom about eating meat but she did not want to insist that the neighbors had to eat meat or go hungry. Here is what she did – she served meat, likely a nice beef roast. But she also served good Wisconsin cheese and fish which was likely perch, a Pautz family favorite. "To Eat or Not to Eat" – that was left to the choice of our neighbors.

Let's take another example. Maybe a fellow Christian friend really struggles with alcoholism. He is a guest in your house or maybe you go out to a restaurant. You know that you have the right to have an alcoholic drink. After all, Jesus turned water into wine. But your friend has a weakness with alcohol. Should you insist upon your right and have some wine or a beer? No, not at all! Your love for him, for her, and your respect for Jesus will lead you to refrain. If, however, there would be someone who seeks to take away the God-given right by insisting it is a sin to have any alcoholic beverage even in communion, we will not yield to that false teaching. And by the way, if any alcoholic does struggle with the wine in communion, that person should let us pastors know so that other steps can be taken.

A main application that comes out of our text is that we are to be concerned about our fellow believers, especially those who are weak or who are going through difficulties of any sort. Jesus says to you and to me, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." It can be easy, very easy, to overlook the weak and hurting. An aunt had several sons and a daughter who attended a Lutheran boarding junior college. Often on weekends they would come home which was within 50 miles away. Sometimes

they would bring a classmate home with them. My aunt had instructed them to bring home a classmate who seemed to be left alone, not the most popular among classmates, perhaps even picked on. "That's the one who needs special love and attention that we as his brothers and sisters in Jesus should give. Bring that one home – we will have a special home cooked meal for him and show Christian love." And they did.

May our good Lord give us a special concern and love for those in or life who are troubled or weak or shunned.

"To Eat, or Not to Eat – That is the Question." You know the answer.