

Nathan Brown
“The Food of Faith”
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West Side Christian Church

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

My wife, Marion, is a rule follower. She has been this way ever since I have known her. If someone with authority in a particular field makes a declarative statement about something, then it becomes law in her mind. She believes it. She abides by it. She is a rule follower.

Well, guess what....apparently, there are a lot of rules when it comes to pregnancy. This medication is okay. This medication is not okay. This kind of exercise is good. This kind of exercise is bad. Sleeping in these positions is acceptable. Sleeping in this position is not acceptable. So on, and so on.

In other words, Marion loves being pregnant! She loves when there are rules. This is the reason she is a United Methodist. They have a whole book, called the book of Discipline, that is just rules. Marion is a rule-follower.

However, there are a set of rules and limitations that has been a bit of a challenge for Marion. Of course, I am talking about the most obvious rules and regulations for a pregnancy—those that revolve around food.

Don't eat processed meat, unless it has been cooked. Don't eat any kind of soft cheese like feta, goat, or blue cheese. Don't even touch this or that kind of seafood, let alone eat it. And make sure to stay away from things like caffeine and alcohol.

Right at this moment, there are a group of you who are thinking in your mind, “Oh, one cup of coffee won't hurt her.” “A little blue cheese is not a big deal.” “I remember eating all kinds of seafood when I was pregnant.” Simultaneously, there are group of you thinking, “Yes, she better not have any of those things. She could hurt those babies.”

In other words, in this sanctuary, in this moment, a debate about food laws is taking place. Believe it or not, that is precisely what is happening in our reading from 1 Corinthians this morning. Paul is writing a response to the church at Corinth about what Christians should and should not be eating.

Here is the crux of the dilemma. The people of Corinth have been living in a polytheistic world, a world of multiple Greek and Roman gods. Part of religion in a polytheistic world is offering certain kinds of meats, fruits, and vegetables, as a sacrifice, to the idols of these gods. One offers food to the gods as a way of worshiping these gods. As a result, these sacred foods are not meant for human consumption.

However, as many of the people at Corinth convert to Christianity, they now have to adjust to a monotheistic worldview. Christianity only claims Yahweh, one Lord and God, and offering food to idols is no longer part of worship. So, the phrase “old habits die hard” might appropriately be applied here.

In other words, these converts who had a religious practice of not eating particular kinds of foods, because they were the foods of the gods, are having difficulty adjusting to the idea of being able to now eat these foods. In fact, some of them are still claiming that, even as Christians, these foods should remain forbidden. One group of the church is saying, “If you eat the food, you are sinning.” The other group is saying, “We don’t believe in idols, we can eat whatever we want.” Sound familiar?

When it comes to the laws and rules of pregnancy, idol worship, or (choose your hot button issue here), there are always basically two sides. Your rule followers and your rule benders. Your fundamentalists and your liberals. Your traditionalists and your non-traditionalists.

Now I realize I am simplifying things here. Some of you are thinking, “It’s not quite that cut and dry. There are always people all over the spectrum from left to right to middle. At the end of the day, though, most of us end up coming down on one side or the other of a particular issue. That is how we are programmed to think, living in a democracy. You get a vote and it is either for “A” or “B.”

It shouldn’t be surprising that the people of Corinth are feuding because this has been the church since it’s inception. Debates about the authority of scripture, the power of clergy, the openness of the communion table, the inclusion of women, African Americans, gays and lesbians—the disputes go on and on.

So how does the church handle one of its first disputes? The same way the church handles many of its disputes today. You write the district superintendent, the cardinal, the bishop, the regional minister, the General Minister and President, the Pope. In the case of the early church, their authority was Paul. Everything at this point is completely normal, mirroring eerily the church today.

What is somewhat shocking about this passage is not that disagreements come up in the church, that there are usually two sides to every debate, or even what the conflict is about in this particular case. No, what is surprising is the way that Paul responds.

Paul writes to the church, “Actually, you are both right.” Sounds like a preacher’s answer, doesn’t it? Paul says, “We do not worship gods or idols, so you are free to eat what you want. On the other hand, I can understand why some would still be hesitant to eat these foods.” Paul recognizes the validity of both arguments.

However, he does not end his response with mere affirmation of both sides of the conflict. Instead, he ends by saying, “But since there are some who still do not know the one Lord, it is a bad witness to eat the meat.” In other words, Paul says “You are both

right in your mind, your reasoning, and in your knowledge. Both sides have sound logic. But, neither of you is correct in your hearts.”

There was a night a few weeks ago that Marion’s uncle was in town and he took us to dinner. For dessert, he ordered us this chocolate volcano cake. Have you ever had one of these before? It is this individual homemade chocolate cake with a pure milk chocolate center that oozes out when you cut into it. Suffice it to say, it’s decadent!

When it came to the table, Marion did one of those, “Well, I really shouldn’t eat this, but I guess I will have one bite.” The rule follower was bending one of her rules. And one little bite turned into eating half of the cake.

About thirty minutes later, she tells me that the babies are just dancing in her belly. Apparently, they loved it too! It was the most movement she had felt during her pregnancy. She said, “I was trying to sleep, but those babies must have been playing football because I could not go to sleep from all the movement.” After reflecting on it, she realized that in one cake, those babies had more caffeine than they had in their entire lives!

Well, the next day, the babies were back to being very quiet. She could not feel them moving, so Marion was a little disappointed. Therefore, she decides she needs to start eating Hershey kisses by the handful so that she can feel her babies again. Sure enough, after the chocolate, the movement began again. She loved it, and so were those babies!

Well, of course I was not aware of the chocolate addiction that had developed until one day I came home to find Marion unwrapping these chocolates and stuffing them into her mouth two and three at a time.

In that moment, she confessed everything. I have to admit, I was a little frustrated. Her argument was, “a little chocolate is not going to hurt anything.” And I responded to her, “It is not about you eating chocolate, it is about why you are eating all that chocolate. You are hyping the babies up on sugar and caffeine for your own gain, not theirs.”

The problem in this passage, for the people of Corinth, is not that there are two sides to the argument, that there are rule benders and rule followers, or even the issue of food law itself. The problem is that both sides are using their logic, or as Paul says, “their knowledge,” for their own gain, and not for others.

For Paul, it is not about whether or not to eat the food; it is about why you are eating the food at all. The church at Corinth is so caught up in the rules that they forget the point of the rules. Both sides are so puffed up in their own opinions that they never stop to wonder who it is they might be hurting.

Jesus talks about this tension in terms of the difference between the actual law and the Spirit of the law. Part of Jesus' ministry is transforming religion from a legalistic set of rules blindly followed, to a movement in which love trumps any rule, law, or decree.

There is a story about a missionary named John McKay, who was touring with a group of Evangelical leaders. They went into the home of a local resident and the host, in great humility, offered the traditional gift of a glass of "home brew." The Evangelicals refused. McKay took a glass and praised the host for its great quality. The host, wanting to offer something to the Evangelicals, brought out his smoking pipe. Again the Evangelicals refused, but McKay took a puff.

Finally, the host brought them to his table, but the food was all local and the Evangelicals did not respond well to it either. McKay, though, took some of all of it and ate it with a smile. When the group left, the Evangelical leaders jumped all over McKay. "How could you drink, smoke and eat that stuff?" McKay simply responded, "Somebody in there had to be a Christian."¹

Amen.

¹ Brand, Rick. <http://www.goodpreacher.com/blog/index.php?page=2>