

Lectionary 24 A
Food Fights Just Make Messes

September 17, 2023
Romans 14:1-2, Matthew 18:21-35

One of the highlights or perhaps lowlights in the movie *Animal House* was the huge food fight they had. On the TV show *Cheers*, a thanksgiving dinner ended up with food being thrown all over the place. When I see such actions, I wonder, “Who gets to clean up the mess?” It’s not something I’d want to do.

From the beginning of the Christianity, there have been “food fights” in the church. Food fights, as I am using the term is a fight that accomplishes almost nothing and usually leaves a big mess. One of these ancient fights was about food which Paul writes about in our Second Reading.

When the Christian church began, all the early believers were Jewish. They had grown up with strict dietary laws. They didn’t eat forbidden foods, such as pork or shrimp or squirrel. Meats that they could eat, couldn’t be eaten with any dairy products – so cheeseburgers are not allowed.

As an illustration of how powerful these food taboos are, a few years ago, I heard a former Muslim speak, who is now Christian. He grew up with very similar dietary laws. Pork was a forbidden food. He told us that the first time he ate pork, he didn’t know it. However, two hours later, he was informed that he had eaten pork. He vomited. He had been so conditioned to believe that pork was bad, that his body rejected it, even two hours after eating it. Even if his rational mind told him that it was OK to eat pork, his stomach didn’t get the message.

By the time Paul writes, there were also a number of Gentiles who had become Christians. They didn’t grow up with the same food restrictions as Jews. Where people grow up determines a lot about the foods they eat ... and the foods they detest. Gentiles could enjoy eating shrimp stuffed with cheese and wrapped in bacon. So there was a food fight: could Christians eat the forbidden foods or not?

Another issue was about meat that had been sacrificed to an idol – which was about the only meat one could eat – often in the pagan temples. Some believers refused to eat such meat, because it gave recognition to the pagan god. Other believers argued that pagan gods don’t exist, so the meat was sacrificed to nothing. Let’s have a good steak.

Paul addresses such food fights in our Second Lesson. Paul seems to indicate in this passage that these fights about food just aren’t really that important. It makes no difference what you eat, as long as you thank God who has given it to you – and you don’t act in ways to condemn or offend fellow believers who may think differently about food than you. They might have grown up in a different culture.

I don’t know about you, but we have made accommodations when we’ve had a vegan over for dinner. We don’t serve all meat dishes. We respect their preferences and don’t condemn them for it.

During the time of the Reformation, there were many of these “food fights.” Luther, following the lead of Paul, stressed the freedom of the Gospel – the liberty of the Christian – being guided by your own, informed, conscience. Luther’s great defense of his actions against the Roman Catholic church was, “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and right reason.” You are to know scriptures. You are to know the Word of God. That is one reason why Luther translated the Bible into German – so the common person could read it. It had only been read in Latin in the churches. In addition to scripture, there is also “right reason.” Using your God-given mind to

figure out your own understanding and responses to God's grace revealed in scriptures. You are to know the Word of God. You use your own minds in those matters to try and understand what the biblical passage means; and how it applies to your own life. In addition, the wisdom and logic of others can help interpret and apply scriptures.

We also need to recognize that the way people were raised can influence what they see in scriptures – just like preferences for food.

This is the way our Lutheran church operates today – there is individual freedom on ways a Christian might respond to the Gospel. One issue that comes up is the use of alcohol. Some denominations make it a new Christian law that a believer can't drink any alcohol. For us, that is a matter of your own conscience. If you want to drink that's fine. If you don't, that's OK, too. You can be just as good a Christian whether you drink or not. You are free to decide for yourself.

However, I think the church does have the right to step in and say that drinking is wrong when it becomes a problem. When one's drinking is destroying the family or one's health. At that point, drinking alcohol is wrong.

In the same way, I think that the church has the right to step in and say that abstaining from alcohol is wrong when folks arrogantly consider themselves better than those who drink – that they are somehow closer to God or better Christians than those drinkers. At that point, your attitude about abstaining is wrong.

Some denominations won't ordain women. Others do. I appreciate the clergy from those who don't, who respect and treat our female clergy as colleagues rather than illegitimate clergy – and I've met some who believed that. At the same time, we need to respect their choice of denying ordination to women. They have come to a different understanding of scriptures than we have. By saying that "it is different" isn't saying that they are wrong.

I've saved a picture of two people arguing. They are standing on opposite sides of a number on the ground. One insists that it is a 6. The other insists that it is a 9. Both are right from their own perspectives. If they only put themselves in the other's shoes, they would see the number from a new perspective.

This week, I shared some of these thoughts with another pastor. He knew of a church where a number of members left because the new carpet wasn't brown like they wanted. That is a food fight – even if no food is involved. Arguing about something that has nothing to do with salvation. It's not only sad when it splits congregations, it's detrimental to the kingdom of God.

At the same time, there are beliefs that we will not back down on – issues and statements that are clearly the center of our Christian faith. Jesus Christ is the Son of God who lived, died and rose for us. That is not a debatable issue. To be a Christian you have to believe that. The triune God is not a debatable issue. To be a Christian you have to believe that – even if we don't fully understand it.

Such things that we confess in our creeds defines us as Christians.

One of the most central aspect of Christianity – the absolute core of our faith – is talked about in our other two lessons: forgiveness. That is another issue where you have no freedom. You have been forgiven by God. Jesus died for your sins. You need not question or doubt that. All your sins have been forgiven by God through Jesus.

The other aspect of forgiveness: You are to forgive others who have sinned against you. It might be hard, but that's essential to our lives as Christians. As Christ has forgiven you, you are to forgive.

Just think what might happen if all the energy that was spent in churches over unimportant food fights, like the color of carpets, was channeled into evangelism – witnessing to those who don't believe God forgives them in Jesus. Or channeled into admitting mistakes, being forgiven; and forgiving others. What if our energy were channeled into seeking to live peacefully and lovingly with each other rather than trying to prove that I'm right – although I think I'm right about this; but I'm open to hear other opinions.

Food fights accomplish little. They don't build up the kingdom. They don't spread the gospel. Food fights make messes – a mess somebody has to clean up. Forgiveness builds the kingdom. Learning from one another – trying to stand in their shoes to see from their perspective. Consider that God came down to earth and lived in our shoes. God knows, first hand, from our perspective. He understands. He forgives. He asks the same from us. To try and understand and to forgive.