

## “PETH” (People for the Ethical Treatment of Humans)

### 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Meat is murder. That's what the PETA T-shirts, coffee mugs, and tote bags say. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals use this slogan to send the message that animals should never be killed for food.

Some of you know I'm trying to become a vegan. I've limited my meat intake to venison, beef, pork, chicken, pheasant, fish, and buffalo. I no longer eat goat, alligator, snake, frogs, squirrel, goose, or duck.

Most of you know that I'm a murderer when it comes to venison and pheasant. But is meat murder?

For the apostle Paul, meat is something else: *A stumbling block*. He tells the Christians at Corinth, "I will never eat meat," not because he's a vegan, but because he does not want to cause his fellow Christians to *stumble* over the issue of food *that has been sacrificed to idols*. Food is a powerful force, one that can both nourish people and cause great harm. The documentary “Supersize Me” showed the great harm done to the human body living on fast food.

If Paul had been living in Europe in the 1500s, during the time of the reformation in Germany, he would have encountered a meat and potato problem. Up to then, hardly any one in Europe had ever seen a potato, much less eaten one, until Spanish explorers brought them back from South America. Europeans initially didn't have an appetite for spuds. Since God had not mentioned potatoes in the Bible, clergy preached that the vegetable was the Devil's handiwork. Can you imagine a sermon today, condemning the satanic influence of French fries?

People were also frightened by the outward appearance of the gnarly vegetable. They believed it looked like a leper's hand, so rumors began to spread that potatoes caused leprosy, kind of like the mythical link between toads and warts.

No doubt the apostle Paul, if he had been alive in the 1500s, would have figured out there was nothing sinister about a potato. But since some people saw it as demonic, he would have passed on eating a potato. In verse 13 Paul argues, "If food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat".

Fortunately, the potato problem was solved in the 1700s. During a series of failed harvests, many favorite crops died -- except the potato. People set aside their superstitions so that now potatoes provide people with food around the earth. The United Nations got so excited about the potential for root vegetables in developing countries that it named 2008 "The Year of the Potato." From the Devil's handiwork to a major food source in just 500 years.

So this brings us to our text, which is all about meat. But since I'm a meat and potatoes kind of guy, I decided I couldn't talk about one without the other. Then I started to remember when my grandpa would take me out into our potato patch where he would use a big fork to dig up the mounds and I would follow behind filling bushel baskets with potatoes.

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that potatoes remind us of our church community. You never dig up a single potato just growing there alone in the dark. There's always a bunch of potatoes, a group, a community of potatoes of all shapes and sizes.

Contrast that with the carrot that comes up alone and self-absorbed or the onion that makes you cry or the purple-red beet that grows alone and needs sweetening to make it edible.

But the potato! There's always a group of potatoes that can be pretty ugly looking, but we love them anyway and they usually don't make us cry.

Then I remembered how during my youth the potato took on a human face. Do you remember Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head and the Richard Nixon potato with eyes and noses and ears?

And you can cut up a potato, throw it in the ground and it will multiply itself and grow *more* potatoes. You can't do that with those self-centered carrots, onions and beets.

But I digress. There are few things more personal than our food choices, whether we think French fries are devilish or delicious, or whether we think of meat as murder or as a tasty main course. But personal choices are never completely personal. Our choices have an impact on the community, which is why Paul makes a connection between food and the health of the church. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he uses the question of eating meat as a springboard for discussing how Christians should treat one another.

Paul wants everyone in Corinth to be a member of PETH -- People for the Ethical Treatment of *Humans*.

Paul begins with a clear statement of his belief that love is more important than knowledge. He immediately undermines anyone who feels that he has superior knowledge on the question of whether a Christian should eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," insists Paul, clearly expressing a preference for the power of love, which builds up the body of Christ. He goes on to say that love is the key to having a relationship with God because "anyone who loves God is known by him". So our

relationship with God, God's love for us and our love for God is much more important than whether or not we eat meat.

Paul reminds us that since there are no other gods that really exist our focus should be on the "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." (v. 5-6)

God is the source of all that exists, even meat sacrificed to idols. Jesus is the Lord through whom all things exist, even potatoes. Since God created everything and called it good, no food should be off limits to us, even at a North Dakota wild game feed!

Problem solved. Wrong!

Remember, Paul is more concerned about Christian behavior than he is about the status of meat sacrificed to idols. He knows that since some Christians in v. 7, "have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled."

Even though Paul knows that idols are figments of the pagan imagination, he also realizes that some Christians are going to get sick to their stomachs if they eat idol meat, or if they see their fellow Christians eating such food. He warns Angus burger Christians to in v. 9 "take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak".

For Paul, the challenge for the Christian community is to be a part of PETH. This means doing nothing that is going to cause a brother or sister to stumble. He warns against using knowledge in a way that destroys "weak believers" (v. 11). It reminds you that when you "sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (v. 12).

In v. 13, Paul says that "if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall".

Cutting meat out of his diet is the way that Paul shows that he values love over knowledge. Even though he "knows" that it's O.K. to eat meat, he won't do it because it will negatively affect his relationships with the Corinthian Christians.

And how about us? What are the choices that show that we care more about the nourishment of our neighbors than about indulging our own appetites? What behaviors really nourish the church – the Body of Christ? How can we be loving, gracious, and supportive of those whose choices are different from our own?

Jesus is going to offer final judgment, not any one of us. Jesus did say in Matthew 15:10-11; "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

In John 13:35 Jesus said: "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." A disciple who loves will never intentionally cause another disciple to stumble and fall.

As disciples of Christ, we should all be members of the PETH – People for the Ethical Treatment of Humans. We show our membership by loving one another, by sacrificing for one another, by working with one another. We show our membership by being the body of Christ.

May the peace of God . . .

#736 – God the Sculptor of the Mountains