

Sermon – Epiphany IV
Christ Episcopal Church, Media, Pennsylvania
The Rev. Adam Kradel, Ph.D.
1st Corinthians 8
29 January 2012

There is a theological issue you deal with every day. You may be aware that you are dealing with it; you may not. Every time you put food into your mouth, chew and swallow, you are making a theological statement.

This reality is more apparent to our Jewish brothers and sisters who still adhere to a Kosher dietary code. (And by the way, a roasted kosher chicken from Trader Joe's is one of my favorite meals in the world.)

But it really doesn't matter that we, as Christians, do not have specific foods forbidden to us. We make a statement through eating by deciding, either overtly or by default, what we are going to eat.

There is no greater way of celebrating God's creation than by enjoying the broad array of food that exist on this earth. Something that is fascinating about the abundance God has given us in the plant and animal kingdoms is the very limited numbers of plants and animals that have been domesticated so that they become part of our regular diet. Only about 40 animals of all the animals on the earth have been successfully domesticated. The process whereby these animals became domesticated must have occurred by a process of trial and error that is lost to history. I pity the fool who tried to domesticate a deer, or a raccoon, and I am sure that someone must have tried.

Likewise the number of domesticated plants is a very small proportion of all the plants that grow on this earth. I suspect that humans figured out which plants to eat by a long process of trial and error. Someone had to eat the little kernels of germ that fell from wheat grass in order for us to learn of the health properties of wheat. I am sure someone else must have tried eating pine needles.

God really has given us quite an abundant creation. If you ever forget this reality, go to the venerable produce market Gentiles. There you will find at least four types of potatoes (and in your mind you can be aware that there are at least 70 popular varieties of potatoes). At Gentiles you will find at least three types of tomatoes, at least two types of broccoli; you will find cassava, you will find avocados, you will find greens in abundance, and God has given you all these things. And in some cases, such as corn, God's good creation received a little tweaking from enterprising human beings. Corn began as a very small grass, but somehow ancient farmers managed to develop it into what we know today.

All of this is good. Remember, God lovingly crafted God's creation and said that it was good.

Then, at one point in human history, the Hebrew people started to eat based on some guidelines, as a way of being faithful to God. Everyone is aware that devout Jews of the Conservative and Orthodox variety do not eat any type of swine. What is sometimes a surprise to the Gentile community is the deep extent of Kosher food laws. For instance, to keep Kosher you can not mix (even inside your stomach) meat and milk. This means no cheese steaks. To keep kosher you can not put meat on a plate that has been used to hold a dairy product, for fear of cross-contamination. To keep Kosher you can not eat scallops, shrimp, or any other type of shell fish. Remember, you are what you eat, and if you don't want to be shellfish, then...

In the past some Christians explained the old Jewish dietary laws as an early form of a health code. Shellfish spoils easily, and so therefore the ancients forbade eating it. Pigs are dirty beasts and therefore the ancients forbade eating swine.

These days our knowledge of food codes in the Hebrew Bible have developed so that we know that these old explanations are not true. What was true for the

Hebrews was that the Hebrew people were a poor, scrappy, and hard edged people who live right along side the wealthy and sophisticated Canaanites. A clear temptation for the Hebrews was to start trying to imitate their beautiful neighbors. The Hebrews made food laws to remind them of who they were. The Hebrews needed to know, you are the people of God. Every second of every day, you are God's child and you, as a child of God, live by a set of guidelines. God is the one who brought your people out of Egypt and brought you to the Promised Land, and your responsibility is to be faithful to God. So, therefore, no eating shrimp.

Interestingly, I have a Rabbi friend who serves a congregation in Virginia and one day he told me that he would see his congregants walking out of the local crab shack and they would skulk and try to hide from him.

We Christians, of course, are not bound by the food codes from the Hebrew Bible. Jesus came to us as the embodiment of the Law, and Jesus transformed our relationship with God. Some commandments do remain. If I recall correctly there are ten of them. But other rules of the Hebrew Bible are no longer binding.

But here is the trick. One value that exists in food codes is that by eating a certain way, a follower of God could be reminded of her devotion to God. A follower of God can remember her identity simply by fixing lunch in a certain way.

You may have noticed that the Apostle Paul repeatedly attended to matters of diet when he wrote to Christians in new churches across the Mediterranean. People in the church in Rome wanted to know whether the old food codes were binding. People in the church in Corinth wanted to know if it was OK to eat food that he previously been offered to idols. Some people in Corinth were concerned that if you ate a piece of lamb that had been offered to a statue of Apollo, then you were in effect declaring your allegiance to Apollo.

The Apostle Paul's response was, "Don't worry about it. It is just a statue." Then he continued, "Well. Maybe if you eat that lamb someone will get confused, so maybe you should play it safe."

Our struggle continues.

These days our concern regarding diet and our relationship with God revolves around environmental sustainability. That is, our earth is too small for all 7 billion people on the planet to subsist on a diet of red meat, corn chips, and Coca Cola. Rather than me give a big lecture on the topic, all you have to do is go to a web site called <http://www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx>

This site will show you the relationship between your eating habits, and the carbon based fuels required to produce the food you consume. You will also learn that it is environmentally virtuous to not wash your car, just if you were looking for an excuse to get rid of that chore.

While contemporary Christians do not follow the Levitical food codes, we certainly make a theological statement through our diet. Some recent developments have been to: buy food produced organically; buy food that has not been shipped a great distance from where it was produced, and to join local food cooperatives. Remember that it is possible to shop locally both by patronizing the Media Farmer's Market, and by shopping at Booth's Corner.

The Apostle Paul dealt with Christians trying to figure out whether it was appropriate to eat food given as a sacrifice to Apollo. We have to decide if it strengthens our relationship to God to buy drinking water that has been flown in from Fiji.