

“I Need More Specifics On What I Should Do”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

Sunday, November 19, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

St. Andrew's Day

Scripture Readings: Psalm 126, refrain 1

I Corinthians 10:23-31

(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It is not always easy to understand the big issues of the bible. They come from a different time and place, a different understanding of the world, and a different cultural setting. Yet the story from the church in Corinth shared today has some similarities to today to this extent – people were obsessed with food issues.

Go on facebook and you will find many people who like to post their latest dessert conquest, or most recent meal at a five star hotel, or the lunch had with a friend in the local pub. Posting food pictures and facebook go together like a hand in glove. We can relate to concerns about food. And we can relate to understanding what is the appropriate food to eat.

Some people with severe allergies must be careful to know all of the ingredients in a given entrée or dessert or salad. I once had dinner with a person who when the salad arrived, said, “I cannot eat this – there is mustard in it.” I am not one who particularly likes mustard, and figured I was very sensitive to the smell (even if I had a million dollars, unlike the song, I would not buy Dijon Mustard), and in this case I could not smell a hint of mustard, but he insisted the cook come out. Sure enough, mustard seeds were in the dressing. Innocuous to me, but clear to him. So severe was his allergy that eating the salad could have had grave consequences, given the meal was in a resort over an hour from the nearest hospital, and no one thought it important to put the ingredient on the menu. For him, it was a matter potentially of life and death. There are people with Celiac disease who avoid most bread products and coatings, and diabetics who care about their sugar and carbohydrates intake.

Now the issue in Paul's church was far different than these, but no less significant in the minds of the members of the day.

“Can we eat meat that has been offered to idols?”

Most non-Christians might have taken an offering to the gods of the day, and received back the blessed meat, which was then offered for a meal in the home. Whether a believer or not, one could eat the same meat offered to idols if ever invited to a neighbour's home. So ‘can we eat it or not?’ was the question of the day. Paul offers a blanket statement that food as such does not contaminate us. If we know it has been offered and blessed before idols, probably best not to eat; if we do not know, go ahead – it won't hurt you.

Now that seems like wise advice as far as it goes, but it does not give much direction. It says more about what will not hurt us than about what will help us. When it comes to

determining a nutritious meal, much more must be factored into our decision than what will not harm us.

Even so, 32 years ago Anne Lindsay, former food editor for the Toronto Star, wrote a book entitled *Smart Cooking* that was created in cooperation with the Canadian Cancer Society. It featured “Quick and Tasty recipes for Healthy Living.” The concern about diet by the Canadian Cancer Society was a new one back in 1985. Few linked potential concern about health, especially cancer, with diet in the 1970’s and earlier. While people had concerns about cholesterol and fried foods for the well-being of the heart, cancer as seen as something separate.

But new evidence showed that one’s diet could affect one’s propensity for cancer, and so some guidelines were established that this cook book followed:

- 1) Reduce your total daily fat intake to no more than 30% of your daily calories;
- 2) Eat more fibre-containing foods;
- 3) Have several servings of vegetables and fruits each day;
- 4) Keep your weight close to ideal;
- 5) If you drink alcohol, have two or fewer drinks each day;
- 6) Reduce you consumption of smoked, nitrate-cured, and salted foods.

There you have it – a designed diet that no doubt has been modified and clarified in the last 32 years, but the beginning of a modern realization that diet does matter.

We have always known food impacts us. The German theologian Ludwig Feuerbach remarked in the 19th century that “You are what you eat,” a testimony to how food impacts our outlook, moods, and well-being. But you and I know that food is only one component of the whole person. Of greater concern is the need to feel whole, healthy, at ease and relaxed whatever we do and whatever we eat.

In his day Paul was speaking to a people who felt immobilized by the fear that they might be doomed to eternal damnation if they ate the wrong food, and he tried to assure them that food does not have that much control over your life. Spiritual well-being is much more than worrying about what you eat.

And so, while we can and should pay attention to what foods are healthy and helpful for us, the greater concern is to make sure we have food to eat, period, and to realize that worry about food can be more debilitating than any individual food choice in and of itself.

Paul’s teachings on food represent a significant shift in the religious understanding of the early Christians. Up to the time of Jesus, there was an understanding that the earth was the purview of the devil, and we needed to be careful or the devil would lead us astray because he had so much control over us.

Jesus taught that the goodness of God is more powerful than evil ever will be, and even food given to idols, as Paul iterates, or food harvested against the law on the Sabbath, as Jesus referred to, cannot create an evil reality that will lead to judgment and condemnation forever. Our intended action, when it is to do good and not evil, is of utmost importance,

and so the truth of this teaching goes beyond the mere concern about what I will cook for dinner or what I plan to eat this coming week. If I am acting in a way that seeks to reveal God's goodness, and not exploit the earth or others on it, then God can help me to make those actions whole and nurturing.

We need to stop running from the devil and start looking for that which is helpful and nurturing.

Running from the devil can be an exhausting and debilitating reality. We are privy to a seeming endless array of stories of people who felt betrayed through residential schools or being scooped out of their reservation home into adoption in the 1960's and beyond, but we need to hear these stories so we understand the pain and hardship experienced by young children ripped from their traditions and homeland. Then we need to make sure we act in new and nurturing ways.

Living in uncertainty is never helpful, no matter why we are in that situation.

Some days I want more specifics on what God expects of me, and how I should live my life. But if I can get straight the basic teaching that seeking to do good is the ultimate expectation for my life and the lives of others, I have begun a journey that leads to the truth of the early church and the original followers of Jesus.