

## Sermon for Riddells Creek

1<sup>st</sup> of February 2009

Don't sweat the small stuff. I don't know who first came up with that, although it is the title of a self-help book on simplifying your life by someone called Richard Carlson, but I think Paul is saying something very similar in today's passage from his letter to the Corinthians. Thank goodness for the Corinthians! Here was a community with issues, so many issues that they wrote to Paul several times with long lists of questions asking for his advice. We don't have their questions, but we do have two of Paul's answers. Today's issue is food sacrificed to idols. Is it lawful to eat it or not? For many of the Corinthians, food sacrificed to idols might have been the only meat they were able to eat, as they bought it from priests in the service of some Greek or Roman god. So, if you are a Christian, may you buy food that had previously been roasted before an idol so that a god could enjoy the delicious scent of BBQ?

One group of Corinthians thought "yes". Their argument was that there are no such things as idols, that there is only one God, and so whatever priests might have thought they were doing with their meat, they weren't really giving it to gods. They couldn't; there aren't any other gods. So, good Christians could eat the meat with a perfectly clear conscience.

Another group apparently thought differently. They had been brought up worshipping Greek and Roman gods; they had always known that the meat roasted before idols was an offering to those gods; and so when *they* ate the food they thought of it as food offered to idols. Their consciences were defiled.

It's not surprising that food caused such a controversy. Eating is one of those things that we all have to do, it's central to our lives, and that gives it a lot of power. We might laugh at early Christians getting so uptight about food sacrificed to non-existent gods, but we have no reason to feel superior. We have similar questions about alcohol, one of the reasons that the Uniting Church, unlike the Anglicans and Catholics, uses grape juice in communion services, despite the fact that the liturgy refers to it as "wine" is because we recognise that for some people not drinking alcohol is a matter of conscience. Then there's the way we describe some food as sinful, and feel that we are virtuous for abstaining from it. Bizarrely, when I took a break in the middle of writing this sermon to check the news on the ABC website I found, staring me in the face, the item "A killer dessert," which was actually a recipe for butter cake full of berries.<sup>1</sup> It hasn't literally killed anyone, as far as I'm aware, it was just using that language of good and evil food to indicate how irresistible this particular cake is. We can get very intense in our relationship with food. As the Corinthians apparently had.

But surely those who felt able to eat meat sacrificed to idols were right? There are no such things as gods. There is only one God, we know that. Eating meat or not eating meat won't bring us closer to God. So why not eat the meat?

Because, Paul says, it's not about knowledge, it's about love. On this issue the Corinthians were divided into groups called the strong and the weak; the strong who could eat meat with a clear conscience and the weak who couldn't. If the weak see the strong eating meat, Paul argues, they might follow their example. Since they think that what they're eating is food for idols, they will have fallen into sin. So, Paul says, the loving thing for the strong to do is not to tempt the weak into sin. Don't eat meat sacrificed to idols. In fact, Paul says, "if food is a cause of their failing, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall". The strong are right, their knowledge is absolutely accurate. But if their knowledge leads them to harm their brothers and sisters, then they're being puffed up. Their perfectly correct knowledge is taking them further from the God they claim to know.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/stories/s2216394.htm>

Paul is telling the strong not to sweat the small stuff. Sure, you're right, but that's not the most important thing. The most important thing is the relationships within the community and the love that you can show your fellow Christians. If something that you do offends and challenges them, don't do it. Love them by letting go of your knowledge.

But I've said this is about not sweating the small stuff because it does only apply to things that are unimportant. Eating meat sacrificed to idols or not eating meat sacrificed to idols isn't going to harm anyone. Using alcoholic wine or grape juice in communion doesn't make a difference to the symbolism of this being Jesus' blood, so we may as well use grape juice for the sake of those whose conscience won't let them drink wine. The criterion that Paul uses here is love, and there are occasions when love does demand that we offend some people.

Paul wrote in another letter about just such a situation. He was appalled when Peter stopped eating with Gentile Christians in Antioch.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Peter, a Jew, ate with Gentiles was offending some Jewish Christians. But there Paul did not advise the strong to refrain from table fellowship because of the offence to the weak. The criterion is love, and this separation at the table was dividing the body of Christ which should be united in love. That wasn't small. That was something to sweat about. There are times when Christians must, for the very sake of the gospel, give offence to others, and this was one of them.

It's all about love. That's how we decide what is important and what is unimportant. That is how we decide to let something go, despite being sure that we are right, or to take our stand, saying with Martin Luther: here I stand, I can do no other. I believe that the important stuff includes what Jesus in Matthew calls "the weightier matters the law: justice and mercy and faith".<sup>3</sup> In those matters we should be prepared to offend for the sake of the gospel. Because they are matters of love.

Paul is very wise in his advice. People aren't going to be convinced to change by cogent arguments that appeal to their reason. We are only going to be convinced to change by loving actions that appeal to our hearts. People are loved into change; it doesn't happen in any other way. There's every possibility that those the Corinthians called "weak", seeing those called "strong" give up their own eating of meat for the sake of their brothers and sisters, might have recognised this as another example of the truth that it is only love that brings us closer to God. Their fears and anxieties around food might gradually have been overcome until they too could say "Food will not bring us close to God". If that did happen, it could only have happened through love. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," Paul tells the Corinthians. "Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus tells his disciples. God is love and love is at the heart of the gospel. All our decisions are to be based on love, as we live joyously in response to God's love. Nothing is more important than this. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 2:11-14.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:23.