

"CAREFUL WHICH ENTREE YOU CHOOSE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
February 2, 1997

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### INTRODUCTION

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Now I'm not at all sure what that means, but I have a pretty good idea, but here is a pizza fact that has nothing at all to do with the White House.

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### DEVELOPMENT

I don't know what relevance these facts and figures have for us as we sit in the after-glow of the Super Bowl and as we now begin to approach the Season of Lent....except to emphasize what an important role food plays in our lives. A recent poll taken in an American suburb asked what were the principle problems confronting our world. Guess what the poll revealed. How many of you think it was war? Or how many think it was drugs? Or immorality? Or hunger? Or marital infidelity? The number one problem, said this small village, was "dogs running loose in the neighborhood", and number two was "how to lose weight".

Food is important to us. It's important not only for keeping us alive, but also as a source of pleasure. Think for a moment of how many important moments are spent around a table. Remember, too, that food is a source of a lot of our nation's income...not only for restaurants and the fast food emporiums, but also for the forgotten farmer. And then, of course, there is the diet industry... because, unfortunately, in a land of abundance, most of us eat too much.

I heard about a doctor who recently felt it was in the best interest of his patient to put him on a diet. He said,

"I want you to eat regularly for two days, then I want you to skip a day. Follow this pattern for two weeks and then come back to see me. After 2 weeks you should lose 5 pounds. Got that? Eat two days and skip a day."

Two weeks later the man came back for his appointment with the doctor. He had lost 20 pounds. The doctor was puzzled and said to him,

"You lost all this weight just by following my instructions?"

The man said,

"Yes....I'll tell you though, I thought I was going to drop dead on that third day!" The doctor said, "From hunger?"  
"Oh, no...." said the man...."from all that skipping!" Well, it's no wonder he lost so much weight...food has an important place in our lives.

#### FOOD AND THE EARLY CHURCH

Food was important to the early church. You'll remember that they had many of their meals together and their most important ceremony other than baptism was the sacred meal of the Lord's Last Supper. "This is My body...this is My blood...take and eat, take and drink".

Food was also the source of one of their memorable conflicts. It's recorded there in First Corinthians, chapter eight. Let me give you a bit of background to this passage which Tom read earlier for us.

First, remember that many of those early Christians had been pagans. They had been accustomed to offering sacrifices to idols before giving their lives to Christ and most of their friends, I would gather, were still pagans. And suppose they were a guest in a friend's home and that friend served meat that had been offered in sacrifice to a pagan deity. Should the Christian abstain from eating the meat or was eating it permitted? This got to be a serious issue in the early church.

They did not live in a land where most of their neighbors were at least Christians nominally, as we do. The pagan faith of the Roman Empire contained so many corrupting practices that it was very important for Christians to set themselves clearly apart. And so they raised the issue, quite sincerely, should they accept the hospitality of their pagan neighbors by eating meat which they knew had already been offered to idols?

Now clearly, Paul considered the question, on the surface, to be a "non-issue". After all, idols have no real existence...so offering them sacrifices was an illusion in the first place. To me, it's something like people who follow astrology in this land. ~~The practice is not a threat to our Christian faith.~~ However, Paul recognized that some of those early followers were confused when they saw fellow Christians eating food that had been offered to idols. Somehow to them it seemed to be endorsing idol worship. When Paul saw their confusion, he vowed to abstain from eating such meat rather than lead these new converts astray.

#### A RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE ANOTHER

He was saying in so many words that we have a responsibility for one another.

And put that down as the first thing that today's text is saying to us. Here it is again....

"Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat...lest it cause my brother to fall."  
(I Corinthians 8: 13)

Certainly we have responsibility for the world, but our first responsibility is to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Even within the church family, there

are apt to be different levels of spiritual maturity. There are also different levels of life experience. Some of us have lived relatively "pain-free" lives. Others of us hurt every day we live. If we are the body of Christ, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of other people. Remember that expression....and where does it come from..."I cried because I had no shoes til I saw a man, who had no feet?"

In Gordon MacDonald's book, Forging a Real World Faith, he tells about a dramatic episode that he witnessed one time when he was sitting on the balcony of his apartment here in this city...gazing out at the Hudson River with his powerful binoculars.

His attention was drawn away from the river by the sight of a green van with engine trouble pulling off to the side of the Westside Highway. The van was at least thirty minutes away from his apartment so he knew he wasn't in a position to offer help to the unfortunate driver. To MacDonald's surprise, the van driver just walked off and left his vehicle there...which, you and I know, is not a safe and wise thing to do in this city.

Every hour or so MacDonald would return to his binoculars to see the green van still parked by the side of the highway. The next day it was still there. At one point when MacDonald was checking on the van he noticed a car pull up behind it and he was momentarily relieved that the driver had returned for his vehicle, but then he realized that the man in that car was not the original driver. The new comer climbed into the van and ninety seconds later came back out with the van's radio in his hands and took off. Later, MacDonald saw two men come by and in a matter of ten minutes, they stole two of the tires off the van. By the next morning, that van was missing one door, its front seat and one of the windows. Another day passed and the engine was gone. As Gordon MacDonald reflected on this poor van that had once been in good condition, he realized that there was a strong parallel between the stripped-down van and our sinful world.

Think of it this way. When God first created the world, it was a place of perfect harmony and wholeness. But sin stripped away the beauty and the peace that God had created. There are many people "out there" who have been stripped down by life and its many difficulties and adventures. They long for an inner beauty and a peace that eludes them. And some of these people may be found in the church...yes, even in this church....sitting in the pews with you and those of us who have been more fortunate in our Christian walk have a responsibility for our hurting brothers and sisters.

This is why no church can ever afford to be torn by conflict. When we are torn by conflict and by those petty disputes and those differences of opinion something happens....and we cannot always minister effectively to those who need us to listen to them....to encourage them....to witness to them. Who was it who said, "There is no love where there is a will to power".

Paul Loetz fell and punctured his lung, broke some ribs and was badly bruised internally. Lying in an Emergency Room, he probably thought things just couldn't get any worse...but he was wrong...they did get worse for as he looked up from his hospital bed, he heard two doctors responsible for his care arguing over who would get to put a tube into his crushed chest. The argument, he said,

became something of a shoving match and one doctor threatened to have the other doctor removed by the Security Police. Loetz finally called out.....,"Please... please....somebody save my life." And while these two doctors argued over procedure, two other doctors came into the picture and took responsibility for the patient and saved his life.

That can happen in churches as well as in hospitals. You and I can get so caught up in trying to resolve our own internal conflicts that we forget that we are called to minister to people. Well, that's the first thing that Paul would remind us of here this morning....we do have a responsibility for one another.

AND CHRISTIAN LOVE MAY REQUIRE SOME SACRIFICE

The second thing that Paul is saying to us is that our Christian commitment....our love for one another...may just require some sacrifice on our part. Reflect on this and remember that the "real thing" in terms of our faith does require not just effort, but also something of sacrifice.

Addressing himself to the issue of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols, Paul explains that there is nothing "intrinsically" wrong with such a practice, but...if seeing him eat meat then causes weaker members of the fellowship to stumble...to lose their footing...then he will not eat meat. I remember my first year in seminary having a roommate who would use this verse and often quote it to support his non-use of alcohol and how that private word of witness convinced not only myself but several others to become abstainers.

It's like a man who was walking down a dark street one night when he saw a faltering pinpoint of light coming toward him. He thought perhaps the person carrying the light was ill or drunk, but as he drew nearer he could see a man with a flashlight carrying a white cane. He wondered to himself,

"Why would a blind man be carrying a light?" And so he asked him why...and the blind man smiled and said, "I carry my light not so I can see, but so that others can see me. I cannot help being blind....but I can help being a stumbling block to others...."

Paul, you see, did not want to be a stumbling block for others. And if giving up meat was a way to avoid hurting the faith of new and less mature Christians, then he would give up eating meat.

You and I would have to admit that this is an approach to life that is completely out of step with our modern way of looking at things. Our attitude is more apt to be,

"Hey...I'm looking out for me and if my lifestyle offends you, get use to it!"

I'm not even sure we even understand sacrificial living anymore. We have tended to become such a self-centered, self-satisfied people that this idea of Paul's that we should act in a certain way to keep from offending a weaker brother or sister in the faith is....well, it's somewhat alien to us. I'm not convinced that we can even relate to some of the sacrifices that some people have made for Christ at others times and in other places.

As we approach another anniversary of the founding of our Church here at this location many years ago, we need to be aware of the fact that we worship in this beautiful place because of the sacrifices of others. Some of those who made sacrifices I have been privileged to know which leads me to ask who are we to think that we can have a vital faith without sacrificing a little bit of who we are and what we hold dear for the good of others? People who take their faith seriously know that they have a responsibility for one another, a responsibility for keeping this center of hope and faith going, and if that means we have to sacrifice a little of our liberty and our possessions so that others will not be confused about our Christ commitment - then so be it!

CHRIST MADE A FAR GREATER SACRIFICE FOR US

After all, Christ made a far greater sacrifice for us. To me that is the crux of the matter. When we take responsibility for others, we are only doing what we ask Christ to do for us. When we make sacrifices for others, we are only doing what Christ has already done for us.

There's a rather moving story of the artist, Steinberg, and a gypsy girl. Struck with her beauty, Steinberg took this young woman to his studio and frequently had her sit for him. About that time he was working on his masterpiece, "Christ On the Cross". This young gypsy girl use to watch him work on this painting. One day she said to him,

"He must have been a very wicked man to be nailed to a cross like that". "No" he replied...."on the contrary, He was a very good man....the best man who ever lived. He died for others." The gypsy girl looked up at him and asked....."And did He die for you?"

Steinberg was not a Christian, but this gypsy girl's question touched his heart and stirred his soul and awakened his conscience and further on down the road, he, too, became a believer. But there's more...

Years later a young Count chanced to go to the Gallery in Dresden where Steinberg's painting of "Christ on the Cross" was on exhibition. The painting spoke so powerfully to this young Count that it changed the entire direction, the entire tenor of his life. He was Count Nikolaus van Zinsendorf, the founder of the Moravian Brethren Church.

The sacrifice that Christ made for us has moved millions across twenty centuries. I wonder...has it moved you? Really? Has it? And, if it has, then you don't mind me reminding you here this morning that yes - we have a responsibility for one another. And yes, there are those times when that responsibility may require something in the way of a sacrifice on our part...on your part. So, friend...be careful which entree you choose and let that word of Paul to the Corinthians have a "go" in your heart....

"Therefore....if food is a cause of my brother's falling,  
I will never eat meat....lest I cause my brother to fall"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence once again, O God, in these moments. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives....where doubt and discouragement and despair often lurk. Visit our sick with the assurance of Your love and encircle the bereaved with your warming, healing presence. Point our markers along the way....to those in danger of losing their way. The race is so short and we would try to run it well and always to your glory. Amen.

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