

"WATCH WHAT YOU EAT"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
February 6, 1994

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INTRODUCTION

In recent days I have found myself thinking about some rules set up by Erma Bombeck for herself for eating or for not eating as one travels to distant places. She suggests:

"Never eat anything you can't pronounce. Beware of food that is described as 'Some Americans say it tastes like chicken.' If a country doesn't have one single head of cattle, no range and no cowboys...don't order beef. This is no time to be a sport. And when they tell you how the skin of what you are eating makes wonderful shoes and handbags, leave it. Resist eating anything that when dropped on a floor excites a dog. In countries where men wear red-checked table cloths on their heads, don't order Italian."

Erma Bombeck's advice is based on years of experience. Someone mentioned to me a couple of weeks ago that sixty-two percent of travelers are bothered by upset stomachs and heartburn and indigestion. Now, before this begins to sound to some of you like a Rolands commercial, let me bring you to the passage that is a springboard for today's sermon.

FOOD: A BIG ISSUE IN PAUL'S DAY

The Apostle Paul traveled a great deal and as he did I'm sure he encountered problems with the food as he served up his message of salvation.

You and I tend to be fairly careful about the foods we eat. We want to eat healthy foods...those foods that are low in fat and in cholesterol. We don't normally hear much about what foods to eat or what foods to avoid when we come to church. In fact, we don't hear anything about food except when we take communion and remember the words of Jesus, "Take and eat...take and drink".

And yet, food was a big issue in the New Testament Church. Specifically, the issue of eating meat was a bone of contention among the early believers in Corinth. It wasn't about becoming vegetarians, though there are those today who tell us that would not be a bad idea. No, the controversy over meat came about this way.

Some of the people in the Corinthian Church were eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols. And this was very upsetting for some of the newer believers for they felt that Christians should have nothing to do with anything that even remotely related to pagan worship practices. The congregation was unable to come to a solution over this sensitive issue so they wrote to the Apostle Paul for his advice. From what I understand about the church at Corinth, it was more of a challenge to Paul than the other churches he had founded. One gets the feeling that there were always serious problems among the Corinthian believers.

Now, the chances are that some of you are thinking....

"This is all very interesting, but what in the world does it have to do with us....where are you taking us today.."

We don't have any problems with people in our congregation eating meat that was once offered as a sacrifice to pagan idols. We don't have anyone who has offered animal sacrifices to idols, or ate the meat afterwards...so what's the point. What's the big deal...

THE CHURCH IS A FAMILY

Here's the big deal. Paul is reminding us that the church is a family. We care about one another. We care about each other's welfare. We care about each other's feelings. We're not just a club. Not just a social organization. We're family. In the words of the hymn we sang a few minutes ago,

"Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love".

I was watching the Jackie Robinson story on television the other evening, being shown I'm sure in connection with the observance of African-American History Month. Lynn and I had opportunity last summer at Cooperstown to meet Rachel Robinson, Jackie's widow. Seeing the movie, reminded me of Larry Doby, the first black player in the American league. Remember what a fine hitter he was and how he broke in with the Indians in 1947.

Larry Doby was a promising rookie for the Cleveland team, but he didn't look very promising, however, at his first time at bat. Tense. Nervous. He swung at three pitches and missed each of them badly. It was his first time at bat and he didn't get within a foot of the ball. He walked slowly back to the bench and there rested his head in his hands...Thurman Thomas style.

A player by the name of Joe Gordon was on that same Cleveland team. This former Yankee was an outstanding second baseman. He batted right after Larry Doby. Gordon had a good record batting against the pitcher on the mound that day. But something quite extraordinary was about to happen...the stuff of baseball legend and folklore. Joe Gordon went up to the plate and missed three pitches in a row, each of them by at least a foot. Then he walked slowly to the end of the bench and sat down next to Larry Doby. Then Joe Gordon slowly put his head in his hands, too.

The question has long been asked: did Gordon deliberately strike out that day? We'll never know, but it is interesting to note that every time Larry Doby went out on the field from that day on, he first picked up Joe Gordon's glove and tossed it to him.

Now, to me - that's family. That's caring that some one else succeeds. I've known people in this church family who feel threatened if other people do well and get a bit of recognition. I've known people who are jealous if another receives a bit of praise. But fortunately, there are many, many more who are like Joe Gordon. Thank God for them.

You see this little Church at Corinth had some folks who did not really care about the weaker members of the congregation. They considered themselves spiritually enlightened, superior. In their opinion, they did no wrong in eating food that was offered to idols. After all, idol worship was just a lot of superstition anyway. And why waste a good steak?

They simply refused to have any regard for the feelings of those newer members of the faith who had once been idol worshippers and wanted to leave all that as far behind as possible.

These newer believers were highly offended and upset that some in the group were eating this forbidden fare. Paul wants both groups to think like "family" and to encourage and support one another. This is the first reason we need to take this text seriously for it reminds us that "we're family".

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE ANOTHER

And this leads us to the second point I want to lift up and that is if we're family, then we have responsibility for one another.

I like Charles Barkley and maybe it's because he has less hair on his head than I do, but frankly....I do get a little irked and annoyed when this basketball superstar does those commercials in which he says, "I am no role model".

Every adult is a role model of some kind to somebody. We can't avoid being a role model any more than we can avoid the rising of the sun!

One time a woman was flying on a plane across the country. She was feeling afraid and sorry for herself and very annoyed by the sniffing of a little boy sitting next to her. She scolded the man on the other side of the child for not taking care of him and giving him more attention. He said to her,

"This child isn't with me, lady. I thought he was yours".

The little boy wiped his tears and said,

"I'm with nobody. When my Aunt Maggie gets tired of me in New York, she sends me back to California and my aunt in California doesn't want me either and sends me back to New York. I was kind of scared...and wished someone would pay attention to me...."

So what did the woman do? She forgot her tears and her own loneliness and her annoyance and all of her sour, negative feelings and put her arms around the little boy who snuggled against her and fell asleep with a smile on his little face. Of such is the Kingdom of God.....of such love....

We're family. We have responsibility for one another and I am thankful for our Sunday School teachers who have that kind of love for our boys and girls. They don't mind being role models. They're not being paid millions of dollars to do it.

OKAY...says Paul. Legalism is no longer part of our faith. There's nothing really wrong with eating meat that has been offered to idols. BUT... but, if it bothers weaker persons in the congregation, is it worth it? If it is a cause of my brother's falling...should I touch it, or not?

I had a roommate in seminary by the name of Jerry Gibson who used this line, this text for his not touching alcohol. And after reading the sad story of an idol of mine and perhaps of yours who in recent days has been admitted to the Betty Ford Center for Treatment of Alcoholism, I'm tempted to take another look at this verse and think about it. Mickey Mantle. Let's paraphrase Paul's line.

"If alcohol is a cause of my brother's falling....I will never touch it...lest I cause my brother to fall....."
(One man's drink may be another man's poison)

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER THE TEST OF OUR FAITH

I have a feeling that Paul would give us an "AMEN" on that. We do have responsibility as Christians for one another. In fact, love...our love, our concern....for one another is the acid test of our faith.

Those Corinthian believers could not see that their enlightened faith was profitless if it did not produce love. Later on Paul would call such "loveless faith" nothing but a bit of sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Sounding brass. Tinkling cymbals. Don't you love that.

It reminds me of something I once read about John Ruskin, the great art critic of 19th century England. A brilliant man with a true love for beauty. His letters reveal his knowledge about and love for the finer things of life. His travels in Italy have provided us with enchanting watercolors of Venice and other cities, as well as drawings of rocks and trees and even hailstones, all testifying to his keen perception of beauty everywhere. Here was a man of great sensitivity to everything....except as someone once said...to those things that really matter.

Once he was in Bologna, drawing a woman with a baby in her arms. Merely looking at the light and shade in the folds of her dress made him ecstatic. He describes his delight in a letter and then, incidentally, he speaks of another fact: the baby, wrapped in those beautiful folds, was dying of hunger.

By his tone it is clear that he felt no responsibility to remedy the situation. Here we find beauty and ecstasy, but no heart! Love is the acid test of the faith that you and I profess. If we do not care about others in our fellowship, our faith is meaningless....sounding brass. Tinkling cymbals.

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER PRODUCES SPIRITUAL GROWTH

one another produces spiritual growth.

And coupled to this is this thought: our love for

If we feel that we are not growing in our relationship with Christ, it is probably because we are not paying the price of loving one another. The child in the nursery who does not accomodate himself or herself to others remains emotionally immature. So it is within the family of Christ. I believe that when we take a bit of responsibility for a ministry of encouragement and inclusion, we find ourselves becoming more like the Master, Himself.

St. Paul says here that there's nothing wrong with eating meat that has been offered as a sacrifice to an idol. HOWEVER, if eating meat will cause a weaker brother or sister to stumble, then he will not eat meat. That is Christian love in action. And so as you depart from here later this morning, go remembering that we are family. We do have a responsibility for one another. That love ~~for~~ one another is the acid test of our faith. And as you and I pause in our daily round to exercise some self-giving love for others, we are growing more like Christ. So....be careful what you eat...or drink, or say, or do...lest a weaker brother or sister be hurt and offended. For in the words of St. Paul:

"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....conscious of Your healing Presence in these moments, O God.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care....those whom we mention in our hearts in this time of prayer. Encircle the bereaved and the broken hearted with Your warming presence...to feel Your peace and power in their lives.

Point out markers on the "trail" for those who may have lost their way but who have found their way in to this sanctuary this February Sunday.

And douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision.

May the bread and the cup which we take here open our eyes to the lifting presence of Christ in our midst. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him. We are family. Lift our minds and our hearts to You, that we may depart from here renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished, made new.

For the race is short. O God...even at its longest. We would run it well, and always to Your glory. This we now ask in the spirit of Christ. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 6, 1994

HOLY COMMUNION

- A. It has long been the custom of this Church to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion....and we like to announce for the benefit of.....that the TABLE OF OUR LORD is open to all...and we would invite all of you to receive...trusting that this may be an occasion of spiritual renewal...a time of rededication of your life....
- B. The elements will be served to you...by the ushers, and upon receiving them, please....

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors worshipping with us...and we hope we shall have opportunity to greet you....be free in the sharing of your name with us....fill out, sign a guest book...come, worship with us....
- B. We've been doing the Lord's work here at this corner of God's Kingdom since 1837. We minister in the name of Christ.... Members: wear your name tags...make some new friends. "No strangers here...only friends who have not yet met!"

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are listed in the bulletin. Also, in the monthly news sheet...copies of which are by the door in the narthex as well as on the table in the RR. Review those concerns carefully so you know what's going on....
- B. This afternoon....three o'clock...here in our sanctuary....the Chamber Chorus drawn out of the OS will present a concert of music....under Dr. Woodside's direction.
- C. Next Saturday is the Mid Winter Rummage Sale. Workers are always needed....Be in touch with Dianne Keller. Receipts go to Camp...
- D. Lent approaches. Ash Wednesday - a week from this Wednesday. That is the 16th of February. First Sunday of Lent two weeks from today. Most New Yorkers - of Christian faith - are aware of Lent and so something with it...so be thinking about how you will observe Lent this year. Extra good works. Devotional book. Bible study. Faithful attendance....make it come to something in your life.

(over)

FINANCIAL CANVASS

as did Melissa Shaw and John Moore

- A. Last November, Jim Perkins and Dan Boone, came before us to lift up the Financial Canvass. Jim - as chair of the Canvass. Dan - as chair of the church's Finance Committee. Now some 12 Sundays later...three months...we have pretty much put it to rest for another year.
- B. Jim Perkins is going to bring us up to date and we may have a special word, too, from Dan....
- C. We thank you, Jim...and those who have worked with you....and all of you who have responded. I confess I had a bit of anxiety back in December...but you've come through - most of you - and if you haven't...help us...it's a nice feeling to reach a goal. Even nicer when you can say "we've gone over it".

OFFERING

- A. And now let us worship God with our morning offering...tithes, gifts...and along with the offerings of our money, let us also offer our hearts to God....and to one another in love and in peace.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive!"

ALSO:

- A. Rose on altar to celebrate the birth of SPENCER CHARLES NEAL. Born to Ann and Chuck Neal...former members.....Miami, Oklahoma. Thursday, Feb. 3rd, 6:11 pm....22 inches long and 9' 4".
- B. Worshipping with us today: Rev. Paul Schradig, DS. Pittsburg District. District that Duane Thompson will be heading to.... hopefully to an appointment there in late June. Assure you you're getting a fine young man in Duane...gifted, articulate, warm...solid. Regret we couldn't keep him up here in this conference.

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