

I've known some Lutheran pastors who, when they begin serving in a new congregation, place an "Ask the Pastor" box in the narthex along with blank note cards. The box serves as an invitation to congregants to ask any questions they have for their new leader. The box and cards are supposed to make people feel more comfortable asking about the pastor's opinion or ideas on a topic.

I don't know if Saint Paul had an "Ask the Pastor" box in any of the congregations he founded, but the Corinthians certainly felt comfortable bringing all kinds of questions to him and asking for his opinion.

"Now concerning the matters about which you wrote," Paul says halfway through his correspondence with the fledgling church in Corinth. In our reading today, he's picked a card from the imaginary "Ask Pastor Paul" box that asks about meat sacrificed to idols.

But before we can understand Paul's answer, we have to understand the circumstance that raised the question: grocery shopping in ancient Corinth.

If you, an ancient Corinthian, wanted to buy cooked meat—a pound of barbeque, some chicken salad, a burger, a kebab—you did that at or nearby the temple. Not The Temple to the Lord God, but the temple to a *god*. A local god, a Roman god, Like Apollo.

And that meat would have been cooked as a sacrifice to that God. Basically, the meat was grilled in front of a giant statue or idol of Apollos and then served up delicious and now somewhat divine.

Except if you were Christian. Because the Christians didn't *believe* in Apollo and didn't *worship* the idols who overlooked the grill. As Paul says, "we know that 'no idol in the world really exists,' and that 'there is no God but one.'"

But the Corinthian Christians did love burgers and crave kebabs as much as the rest of us, so they still ate the meat from Apollo's Bar and Grill but with the understanding that it didn't *mean* anything *spiritually* to eat the meat. As their pastor Paul reminds them, "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do..." "Food will not bring us close to God..."

However, there were some Christians, newer to the faith, who were still *confused* about this meaty matter and didn't fully have the "necessary knowledge" or clarification that eating from Apollo's Bar and Grill was not a big deal.

Let's say a man named Silas was one of those people who didn't yet have the necessary knowledge, who was, as Paul puts it, of "weak conscience" and "a weak believer."

Well, one day Silas is doing his grocery shopping and weak-Christian Silas sees strong-Christian Prisca chowing down on one of Apollo's kebabs. Now Prisca's got the necessary knowledge that her skewer of meat doesn't offend the one God, the Father. She knows that meat isn't going to affect her faith in the one Lord, Jesus Christ.

But Silas, he doesn't understand this when he sees Prisca enjoying her kebab. So he gets...confused...over why she can eat that meat and still worship Jesus. Maybe, he begins to think, it's OK to worship Apollo *and* Jesus Christ. Maybe it's fine to worship both idols *and* the one God. Or maybe he gets angry that Prisca is eating a kebab when someone told him he couldn't eat them anymore and he takes his anger to church and rats out Prisca.

Whatever his response, seeing Prisca eating from Apollo's Grill would likely have caused Silas to practice his Christianity less faithfully, believe less fervently, maybe even fall out with the Corinthian community of Christians, at least causing some disruptions within it, enough that they had to have Pastor Paul settle the matter once and for all.

Now Paul knows that Prisca meant no harm in eating her kebab, but, with Silas as her fellow disciple, her casual lunch choice became a hindrance to the faith of another. That is why Paul calls eating meat sacrificed to idols "a sin against members of your family" and "wounding their conscience." The liberty of one became a stumbling block to another. An individual action had ripple effects on the community.

It's a theme we've been hearing the last two Sundays as we've read Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: that what ONE believer does affect ALL of them. Two Sundays ago Paul admonished the Corinthians that even one person's fornication with a prostitute affects the whole community. And last Sunday we heard Paul encourage them to stay in their established

relationships because all people, married and single and widowed and more, have a call from God and a place in Christ's ministry.

In his advice and answers to the Corinthians, Paul drives home again and again that in a Christian community, individual actions have communal repercussions. Injury or sin to one member is injury or sin in the whole body because we all belong to Christ together.

Paul and the church in Corinth are illustrating, really, what we've seen in the gospels during this Epiphany season: that following Jesus is not a solitary venture. Being a disciple is not an individual matter. Becoming someone who loves God and is known by God is not a self-improvement project. Following Jesus is a communal action, undertaken with the help of others and accomplished for others. "Take care that this liberty of yours" Paul cautions, "does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." In other words, keep your fellow Christians and your neighbors always in mind.

Because God made us to be interdependent beings, relying on others, and living in relationship. Christ called the first disciples in pairs, and tasked them with recruiting more people. Jesus calls to his followers in the context of community. And being called communally means that yes, we're never alone, and it also means that our actions are never solely ours. Because God's mission loves and requires and operates with company.

Now, as modern Christians, we don't eat meat sacrificed to idols, but questions still arise among us about how we are to follow Jesus.

And, as modern Christians, we don't have big "Ask me!" box belonging to Saint Paul to Jesus or God but we still have questions about how ways of the world compromise our Christian faith.

What we do have to figure out and live this shared discipleship is each other. For we follow Jesus together. The Spirit leads us communally, so we can discern the Christian life collectively. We gather not to eat meat but to break bread, together helping one another consider that while something may be lawful, it may not be beneficial. Keeping the community mind, remembering that what one of us does affects all of us, serving our weaker neighbors, not causing even one of them to fall.

AMEN.

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Lutheran Church of Our Saviour
North Chesterfield, Virginia
January 28, 2017
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28