

"What Are the Rules for Eating and Drinking?"

TEXT: I Corinthians 8: 1-13

Since today is Communion Sunday, let's ask the question: What are the rules for eating and drinking at the table of our Lord?

The Presbyterian ***Book of Order*** (W-2.4011) says that anyone who has been baptized is invited to take communion with us. This is a very simple rule: Baptism is the only requirement to take communion.

On the other hand, ***The Book of Common Worship***, the official book of Presbyterian liturgies offers a somewhat broader rule. In the ***Invitation to the Lord's Table*** of the communion service, it proclaims: ***"This is the Lord's Table. Our Savior invites those who trust in him to share the feast which he has prepared."***
(*Book of Common Worship*, p. 68.)

This is a more inclusive invitation: Anyone who trusts Jesus is invited to the table. I emphasized this broader and more inclusive understanding of who can take communion.

Needless to say, I hope and pray that anyone who trusts Jesus, but is not yet a baptized member of the church, is on a faith journey which is leading them to baptism and commitment to the Church.

Nevertheless, I believe that the invitation to the table should be as broad and

inclusive as possible, encouraging all people who trust Jesus as Savior to gather around this table.

Furthermore, when the pastor says the communion liturgy he or she is merely offering the invitation. The decision to take communion is up to the person sitting the pew. Presbyterians do not check credentials when people are receiving the communion. We offer the invitation, and then let individuals decide what to do.

As many of you surely know, other denominations are more restrictive when comes to rules about communion: You must be a member of their denomination, meet with the pastor before the communion service, and follow other guidelines. This is called "fencing the table."

Our scripture passage this morning from Paul's ***First Letter to the Corinthians*** can shed some light on questions about rules for participating in communion. The entire 8th chapter of this letter is devoted to the issue of food sacrificed to idols.

Now, this may seem like an irrelevant topic for us in the 21st century. I don't think that anyone here has ever known anyone who sacrificed food to idols. Nonetheless, the principles that Paul develops here can help us think about our own rules for communion and maybe even other subjects.

Many of Paul's letters were written to congregations addressing specific

problems in their churches. It's difficult to know exactly what the problem was that Paul was addressing in this passage.

Evidently, the Corinthians had written Paul asking questions about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Evidently, Corinthian Christians were living among people who practiced the religious custom of sacrificing meat and other objects to idols. So, the question comes: Can we eat meat that has been sacrificed?

Apparently, it was a common practice to sell sacrificed meat in the marketplace after the ceremony. Should Christians buy or eat this meat?

Paul begins his response to their questions with a short discussion of knowledge and love. This may seem strange, but this is the foundation of his remarks. Paul makes a startling statement about knowledge. Listen carefully.

"Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge."

(1 Corinthians 8: 2.)

All claims to knowledge are limited. If someone says that they know something, they don't really know it all.

Paul contrasts knowledge with love:

"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

(1 Corinthians 8: 1a.)

Paul thinks that people who claim knowledge are showing off to bolster their own egos. People who love are building up the community. not by their egos and claims of knowledge.

Moving ahead to the subject of food sacrificed to idols, Paul agrees with the Corinthians who say that idols don't really exist and that everything that exists comes to us from God through Jesus Christ.

The implication of this "knowledge" is that it is okay to eat food sacrificed to idols because idols don't exist and because everything-- including meat sacrificed to idols-- has been given to us by God for our use and enjoyment. Notice, however, that these conclusions are based on knowledge.

Paul warns the Corinthians they should not be puffed up by this knowledge and use this knowledge as an excuse to do anything they want. Some of the Corinthians do not have the knowledge that is harmless to eat food sacrificed to idols. Furthermore, they believe that they will be dishonored before God if they eat sacrificed meat.

Paul tells the other Corinthians that if they eat the meat sacrificed to idols they might inadvertently encourage others to eat meat they think is impure. If this happens, they will be destroyed. Paul calls them weak, as if to say that if they were stronger they could eat the meat without any problem.

But, for the moment they are weak, and the strong have the responsibility to help the weak for the sake of the entire community.

Paul warns the strong that they should not use their freedom in such a way that they become "***a stumbling block***" for the weak. Paul here is concerned about love.

The strong should not use their knowledge as an excuse to do anything they want. Rather, because of love, they should restrain themselves for the building up of the entire community.

This line of reasoning has many interesting implications for other issues. For example, what are the rules for eating and drinking at the table of our Lord? Notice that Paul did not give the Corinthians a rule about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Rather, he acknowledged their freedom to eat and drink whatever they want, but reminded them to love their fellow Christians and to restrain themselves for the building up of the Christian community

So then, what the rules for eating and drinking at the communion table?

Over the years, Presbyterians have changed our minds about who can take communion. Years ago, we also "fenced the table." Presbyterian congregations issued "communion tokens," something like a wooden coin, that members in good standing would turn in when they took communion. However, using our intellects and our freedom, Presbyterians have developed more inclusive understandings of who can come to table.

According to ***The Book of Order***, the basic rule is that baptized persons are invited to the communion table. This seems

reasonable enough: Why should someone who is not been baptized want to participate in a Christian ritual?

According to previous standards that fenced the table, this is also a more inclusive standard. Anyone who was baptized member in any Christian church, Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Orthodox, is invited to take communion with Presbyterians.

But, some of us, myself included, are willing to be even more inclusive: Anyone who trusts Jesus is invited to the table.

However, it must be said we offer these inclusive invitations because we have the knowledge that God desires that all people receive and participate in the new life offered by Jesus Christ without restrictions.

But, other Christians believe that there should be stricter rules. Mindful of Paul's observation that all knowledge--even Presbyterian knowledge--is imperfect, we surely cannot insist that all other Christians do it our way. As Paul said in the famous "love chapter," I Corinthians 13, "***Love...does not insist on its own way.***" (vv. 4-5.)

Because of our love for other people and for the sake of building up of the Church, we will respect the beliefs and practices of other denominations with stricter rules. Of course, we ask that they also love and respect us, but the bottom line is that we will love and respect them because our love for all of Christ's church.

To be sure, this is very idealistic. It is hard for us to love and respect others if they don't do what we do or honor and respect us.

union with the Christ, be the power forever!"
AMEN

Nonetheless, our highest calling as Christians is to love each other. This love is always being tested among Christians by frank and honest discussions about controversial issues. I don't think that Paul intended that we should shy away from such controversies.

Rather, he was reminding us that love is our highest calling. Christians debate such issues as war and peace, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality, remember that we should not puff ourselves up by believing that our "knowledge" about the subject is the last word. Rather, we are called upon to love and listen to other Christians as we build up the Church.

As we eat and drink this morning at the table of our Lord, we proclaim God's love for us as revealed through Jesus Christ. When we accept this love of God into our lives, we know love for each other is more important than rules about who can come to the table.

And yet, we honor and respect those who believe that stricter rules are necessary. We do this because love for other Christians is more important than insisting everything be done our way. Come to the table in love, honoring and respecting all of God's people.

Let us pray. "To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in