

Bring Your Own Meat

^{NRS} Rom 14:1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess. Every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess.

Christian t-shirts were a really big deal when I was in high school. Now, I don't have anything against Christian t-shirts in theory...but in practice they tend to be pretty awful. There were these two guys I knew in high school, John and Matt- they were twins. And they were ok, they were likable enough, they were both on student council and pretty friendly. But I swear the only shirts they seemed to have in their drawer screamed out these incredibly aggressive Christian messages.

John had one that was a rip off of the Budweiser logo. On the front it looked like a big tall boy of bear, only instead of Budweiser on the top it had "Be wiser", and then on the back it had the caption, "For all the things you do, this blood's for you." And the best part is underneath the caption was this poorly drawn, gory picture of a hand with this

giant nail sticking through it with blood squirting out of it like a fountain. You can't make this stuff up.

Well, this shirt was tacky, but it didn't really bother me. The shirt that got under my skin a little bit was Matt's. It had this huge cross on the front crushing down on these little monster looking things that looked like the bugs from the Raid commercials. You know, the one's that scream "Raid!" Well at the top of the shirt these huge bright letters scream out: "Every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess", and then there were all these exclamation points just in case the neon yellow color didn't adequately convey the sense of urgency. Then, when you looked closer- you notice that the little monster things actually have symbols on them. They were the symbols of other faith traditions and belief systems- there was the star of David from Judaism, the star and crescent of Islam, and the little Darwin reptile you see on the back of cars. And they were all being crushed with their eyes bugging out.

Now, Matt and John were really nice guys. There were very laid back. In fact their eye lids were always at half mast- it always looked like they were about to go to sleep. They weren't mean people- but these shirts, especially this last one, these shirts were incredibly aggressive and antagonistic. I've said before I wasn't a huge fan of the church at that point in my life. And this was one of the main reasons why- this sense that Christianity is judgmental and more interesting in putting others down than putting the world right. As if Jesus didn't come to show us a more excellent way, a way of love, a way of justice, as much as he came to poke others in the eye and to start a movement that would eventually crush any voice but it's own. And this just didn't seem right to me- this shirt made Jesus seem more like Darth Vader than the prince of peace.

And yet, as much as I didn't like it, there was that scripture on top- in those bright colors with all those exclamation points. *Every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess. Every knee. Every tongue.* It really doesn't sound like there's much room left for differences. I'd love to tell you that after studying the Greek that I could wave a kind of interpretive magic wand here and tell you it actually sounds nicer than it does. Like maybe in the original Greek it reads more like: "Maybe kind of sort of *a lot* of knees will bow, if they choose. And perhaps, possibly, if they wouldn't mind, *some* tongues will confess." But alas, the Greek is pretty straight forward here. Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess- this really is what it says. So this week I was left thinking maybe I didn't *like* Matt's shirt, and I may not *like* this text, but I at least have to acknowledge them.

And you know sometimes you have to do this- no faith tradition is perfect. Sometimes you have to be honest about the things you don't like very much- it doesn't mean you have to chuck everything.

So, this is where I was, thinking I was just going to have to swallow all this- but then I started studying the text a little more carefully. And I learned some things. Always dangerous. The first thing I learned was that Paul didn't actually write this bit about knees and tongues, but he's quoting someone- he's quoting Isaiah.

So of course then I had to go all the way back to Isaiah to see what he meant. And the context in Isaiah is amazingly interesting. Isaiah wrote this when the Israelites are being held captive in Babylon. See, six centuries before Christ the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and marched the entire people, man, woman, and child through the

scorching deserts to be slaves in Babylon. It was not a good time. But then, in Chapter 45, God tells them they are going to get a savior, a Messiah, literally, who is going to set them free. The only hitch is this savior, this Messiah, he's going to come from a place they aren't expecting. Isaiah tells them God isn't going to raise up an Israelite to be the Messiah- no, God is going to raise up a Persian, a non-Jew, by the name of Cyrus. And indeed 539 years before the Common Era Cyrus, the leader of the mighty Persian empire crushed the Babylonians and gives the order to send Israel back home. Now, responding to the shock and disbelief among the Israelites that God would work through a Persian, an outsider, Isaiah records God telling the Israelites that hey, "Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess." Meaning it isn't just through Israelites that God acts- but through everyone, every knee and tongue, even the tongue of a guy like Cyrus.

The Israelites wanted to say that only some knees, only some tongues were acceptable- but Isaiah says no, God can work through anyone God wants to. So, originally, this business about every knee and tongue, this isn't a word against outsiders- it's actually a word against the Israelites telling them how wide God's grace is.

So, this is what Isaiah was meaning, but what about Paul?

Honestly, it's kind of a funny passage. Did you notice the big problem going on in the text? Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome and big problem here, the thing that has everyone's knickers all in a twist- it's BBQ. The beef some of the church members are having with one another is about the beef. In a nutshell, some of the community believed it was fine to eat meat that had been dedicated to the Roman gods, and some of the community did not.

See, they didn't have meat packing plants in the ancient world. The way meat was processed in the Roman world started with the temples. Animals were taken to temples where they were slaughtered by the priests. (This actually reminds me of a church I served as an intern in New Jersey- Wharton United Presbyterian Church. Wharton. They had the most unique building- most of it was a church, but decades ago they had apparently hit on some hard times, and so they walled some of the building off and rented it out to a butcher. They weren't proud of this though- they put the picture of the church building on all their brochures, and they always erased the butcher shop from the picture, like it didn't really exist. Well believe me, having served their in the summer with no air conditioning- there were a few mornings there where you knew exactly what kind of shop was connected to that building.) So anyway, back to Rome. After the animal was slaughtered and dedicated to the gods by the priests, a third of the animal was burned as an incense offering, a third was given to the priests, and the rest of the meat was sold in the market place. So if you wanted meat in Rome, it was always going to be blessed by the gods first. No exceptions.

And this posed a bit of a problem for the Christians in the first century. Should you eat food blessed by the gods? A lot of the Christians said no- this was terrible. To them it seemed like saying yes to the gods and turning their backs on Christ. It seemed like caving in to the culture. And aren't people of faith supposed to stand up to culture? Aren't we called to be salt, to be light? Aren't we called to be distinct? The book of Acts and the book of Revelation tell Christians in no uncertain terms to absolutely and without question avoid eating food blessed by the gods. And it's not just that it looked like the Christians were accepting the gods instead of Christ- but that they were accepting

the Empire, the Empire who was putting Christians to death for being different. I mean eating food blessed by these gods- it would be like wearing a Duck shirt in Corvallis, or a Beaver hat in Autzen stadium. People would wonder just whose side you were on.

And I have to say- this is a pretty strong argument, right? Christians should be different. Christians should resist governments when they turn against the people. One of the things that makes me most proud of being Presbyterian is our connection with Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller who back in Germany in the 40's, when the state church was lifting their arms in the Nazi salute, said they would acknowledge no Fuhrer but Christ. And they paid a great price for standing up like this, for being different- indeed, Bonhoeffer paid with his life.

So I think almost everyone would agree- Christians do have to make decisions. We are called to be different and at times to take a stand.

But not everybody felt this way about the meat. Most of the Christians Paul was writing to in Rome didn't see the big deal. See, the people in the churches Paul starts are almost all Romans and Greeks, and not Jews. They didn't grow up in the synagogue. They weren't used to eating Kosher foods. Heck, they probably couldn't even tell you where the closest Kosher deli was. They grew up on BBQ- whether it was Zeus or Apollo brand hot dogs, they didn't really care. Meat was meat, not religion. And now, yes they were trying to put Christ at the center of their lives- but eating meat didn't seem connected. So it was sacrificed to the gods- they didn't believe in the gods. And anyway isn't the important thing what's in your heart- not what's on your plate? They weren't worshipping Zeus when they ate meat- they were just eating food. Come on.

And Paul's take? To me it's amazing. Paul takes an extremely laissez fair attitude here. He supports his Romans, kind of puffing them up, telling them that their faith is actually stronger in his opinion because they know God is going to love them whether they eat meat blessed by gods or not. That they knew God has bigger fish to fry, no pun intended, than what's going on their grills. And the smaller group of people abstaining- Paul doesn't see them as taking a stand for Christ. He doesn't give them a pat on the back. He calls them weak. Believing that God really cares about the kind of food you're eating, that somehow you could slip up and eat something that would make God not love you. This is a weak faith, Paul says.

But this isn't actually Paul's point here- supporting the meat eaters isn't actually Paul's point in this passage, is it? No, his point is much more interesting. Paul's point isn't to say that one group is better than another- but to get the meat eaters to stop beating up on the vegetarians. Although he sympathizes with the meat eaters, probably because their parties were a heck of a lot more fun than the guys with tofu hot dogs and veggie burgers (no offense, Portland); he's telling them to get over themselves and to welcome the vegetarians into their fellowship. Paul's point to both groups is that there is something WAY more important than this stupid food fight they're having. What's WAY more important is that it doesn't matter what your neighbor is eating- what's more important is the attitude you have when you are eating. What's important is whether you are honoring God with your beliefs and your behavior.

After Paul pats the meat eaters on the back a little bit, he snaps at them saying- stop hating the others for being different than you! And focus on your own faithfulness

to God dog gone it. If you're going to eat meat- fine. Just make sure you are eating it to the glory of God. And if you are going to eat salad. Fine. Just make sure you are doing it for the glory of God!

There is a judge, Paul says. And you know what. It isn't you. It isn't you. It isn't me. God is our judge. So the only person you need to be worrying about- is you.

(An election season.)

And this, this is where Paul comes in with the knees and the tongues quote. Paul comes to us when we're in our little like minded groups, and he tells us we better get a grip- because the day is coming and indeed is already when we are going to all gathered together in the sight of God. Paul says when we come before the judge who offered himself to be judged in our place- we aren't going to be alone, but we are going to see an ocean of people, and not all of them are going to be in our little group. And when Paul says that every knee shall bow and tongue confess- this has nothing to do with that ridiculous t-shirt, about crushing other faith traditions. It's aimed us. It's aimed at Christians- Christians so caught up in what's for dinner they can't see some people aren't getting any dinner. Christians who are so caught up having to be right, they aren't able to see everything else that's going so wrong.

Beloved, I believe God calls us to use our minds and speak them. And God trusts us to be the body of Christ- knowing as different body parts we aren't going to see everything the same way. Last week we found out from Mark Maleta this a bring your

own meat kind of church. And I hope this is true. I really do. May we be a people who bring our own meat or meat product, and follow the Reformed watchwords: In essentials unity, in non-essentials tolerance, and in all things, IN ALL THINGS, love. **Amen.**