

“Soda or Pop, Carry-Ins or Potlucks?”

I Corinthians 10:23-33¹

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Plenty of us will have a picnic this week-end. We may pull out drinks, like these (hold up soft drink cans). If you asked for one of these, what would you ask for? “Pop?” “Soda?” Paula Akompong (Selma’s mom) told me that in Ghana they often call it “Minerals” or “Carbonated Drink.” I’ve heard that some places people call all kinds of carbonated beverages simply “Coke.”

The last time we were in New York City, John and I were waiting to get our car out of a parking lot, and I commented to John, “They’ve made a mistake on this sign. It reads, ‘Please stand *on line* here.’” John said, matter-of-factly, “I think New Yorkers say ‘on-line’ here.” When we visited one of John’s friends that day, I mentioned this strange phrase and his friend said, “Why would we say in-line? In-line refers to a kind of skate!” He had a point. Why *do* we say, “Stand *in* line?”

Sometimes “good” means “good.” But plenty of times, in some domains, “bad” also means “good.” And, so does “tight” and “sweet,” and “cool.”

In American culture we assume we are being polite when we eat and chew quietly. But there are other cultures in which silence while eating is an insult! It means you don’t like the food. You’re supposed to make noise to show your enjoyment.

What is the right way to name soft drinks? What is the right way to say something is good? What is the right way to eat?

As you know, Jesus was Jewish, a Jewish Rabbi. When people began to follow Jesus, plenty of his disciples were Jews, like himself. But gradually a whole lot of people who were not Jewish began to follow him, too. We call them Gentiles.

Jews had a number of dietary laws. You know that Orthodox Jews today keep Kosher. For example, Jews have, at least for High Holy Days, a different set of plates for eating meats and dairy products, so that the juices of one do not touch the other. Most of us probably consider whether to serve pork if we invite a Jewish person to a meal. The Jewish food laws started for hygienic reasons, but they became religious laws.

The scripture passage Francis read today used to be, for me, one of the least interesting portions of the entire Bible. The Apostle Paul seemed to be talking to the Corinthians about what to eat, but his argument for whatever he was recommending was very confusing to me. And, the whole thing didn’t seem very important. Then, I learned from a New Testament colleague what this passage was all about, and frankly, now I’m quite moved by this passage. I’ll try to do the passage justice as I explain.

As they came together to eat and worship, early Christians--some of whom were Jewish and some of whom were not--had to decide whose rules to go by. Naturally, the Jewish Christians kept up their dietary laws, not so much because they liked them, but because that was simply the way things were, the way things had “always” been done, consequently the way things should be done.

Naturally, the non-Jewish Christians were not at all inclined to suddenly start eating like Jews. They enjoyed their eating habits quite fine, thank you.

One of the major themes of Jesus' ministry was that love, not laws, was most important. One was to love one's neighbor, not just obey laws with regard to one's neighbor. **Jesus had presented a HUGE change in "the way things are" by stressing love over law.**

In this strange passage that at first seems boring, ridiculous, or confusing, Paul is recommending something quite beautiful, relevant and loving. He says "All things are lawful, but not all things build up." In other words, Jesus followers did NOT have to follow special food regulations, even if they had been Jewish all their lives. However, both Jews and non-Jewish who were now Jesus followers *should be considerate with regard to this conundrum when they eat together. They should all think about how to make the **other** at ease.*

One year ago today a Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic Priest met at their annual 4th of July picnic. They were old friends, so they began their usual banter. "This baked ham is really delicious," the priest teased the rabbi. "You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You just haven't lived until you've tried this prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?" The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin and said, "At your wedding."

That rabbi and priest were **not** following Paul's advice. Paul wanted people not to make each other uncomfortable.

Consider a parallel situation we might face today.

If you are Jewish, and you go to a Christian's home for dinner and are served Virginia Baked ham, then out of respect for those who are serving you, Paul argued, you should go ahead and eat the ham. Love and respect is more important than following food laws. Don't worry what other Jews might say if they knew what you did. Jesus would be proud of you.

Likewise, if you are Christian and you are eating with Jews, then you need not fret about obeying Jewish food laws, for you're doing it out of respect for those who serve you. You don't suddenly become Jewish just because you eat Kosher.

When Roman Catholics were required to eat fish on Friday, if a Protestant also ate fish on a Friday, she did not need to worry that she had become Roman Catholic!

Paul advised, "Eat, drink for the glory of God. That's the point."

Do you open your Christmas presents after the Christmas Eve worship or when you wake up on Christmas morning? Do you take off your shoes when you enter your home? Do you give children allowances or ask them to earn money with chores? Do you pray before meals or not? These are behaviors that can seem SACRED to a family. When we create a family, we tend to think there is a RIGHT answer to these issues, and if our partner has a different SACRED RIGHT answer, then, following Paul's advice, we should consider doing what makes the OTHER person at ease, knowing these little laws are less important than the really big thing--LOVE.

Today we are sharing a symbolic meal together! We are partaking of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, in remembrance of Jesus' expressions of love.

In Tustin, a Filipino woman, Elma Bello, told me of a powerful communion experience when she was in her late teens. She had just spent a week poring over the Bible with other youth at what they called the "Christmas Institute." They wanted their final worship to be relevant for themselves as Filipinos committed to serving Christ in the

Philippines. They knew that Jesus shared wine at the Last Supper. But, they don't grow grapes in the Philippines and don't drink much wine. They do drink a concoction of water boiled with ginger root, sweetened with sugar. The ingredients were local and inexpensive. So, they served bread and "salabat" for their communion. Elma said, "I felt that Jesus was there with us; He was one of us, drinking 'salabat.' God's love transcends race, color, time, and place."

Discussing whether to call a drink "soda" or "pop" can, and often does, lead to laughter. Yet, if we are honest, at times we have a little inner feeling, "but I'm right." Sometimes it matters a lot to us. To have something that is "just the way it is" considered wrong by others is like having our reality pulled out from under us. It's almost too much to ask of us at times.

That is what Paul was facing. Jews had their realty; their way of being religious. So did Gentiles. Yet, these people were now all Christians. Paul was confident that they could all eat together. But he did have empathy with their difficulty. He did not diminish their problem. He did not call the people silly or selfish. He did not scold them. He simply advised that they **try to do what would make others at ease.**

Sometimes it happens when trying to follow Paul's advice that one person or one group of people gives in much more often than the other, until one person or one group realizes that they do not have ANY of their old ways of defining themselves left. When we form a family, sometimes one person gives up much of how he or she did things, adopting the other's ways quickly. Then, one day he or she comes to feel, "I need some of my own tradition, my identity, to be acknowledged and respected, too."

It takes courage and huge self esteem for some people to say, "My way is Okay, too. We don't always have to do it your way, even though I do not put down your way." Selma Aqueea Foseeyaa was baptized today. Some time soon she'll have a naming ceremony in the tradition of Ghana. Selma is fortunate--for she will have **self esteem and empathy** built from several cultures.²

The Apostle Paul was encouraging exactly that--for the multi-cultural Corinthians to have self esteem from their original religious cultures, but also to have empathy for those who were different from themselves.

If you usher with our congregation on Tuesday at the Redlands Bowl, and I join in the group picnic beforehand carrying a bag of potato chips as I say, "here's my 'casserole,'" and Susan Kean joins the outdoor picnic as she says, "Here's my 'carry-in,'" just laugh at us... think about putting us at ease as you bring your "dish to share," probably with something actually on the dish. We'll all be at ease in this loving community.

Maybe you can also help me out. In my family growing up, we called all objects that functionally held cold liquids "glasses." If an object held hot liquids, it was for our family, a "cup." However, in John's family something was only called a "glass" if it was made of glass. All other containers, even if they held cold liquids and were tall and thin were called "cups." Would you please tell John that he's wrong?

¹ Word for Children was something like this: Lifting up a football, asking the kids what it is and what the game is like... gee people throw it, run holding it, and oh, yes, occasionally they kick it with their feet. Lift up soccer ball... Are you allowed to touch the ball with your hands? (Except for goalkeeper) it's all the players' feet (or head) ... the rest of the world, except our country, calls it a "football" (futbol). For us in U.S. it's not much of a problem, we call it soccer and the rest of the world calls it football. However, what if inside our own country we called it by both names? Paul was sort of a minister to people in city of Corinth... and they had a situation sort of like that... should they call it football or soccer? Paul said they should do whatever makes the OTHER person at

ease... Ask who in congregation is being considerate of all the rest of us by calling the game "soccer," because they'd more naturally call it "futbol."? Thank them for putting rest of us at ease.

² Our daughter was shocked when she went to college, to find that all the New Yorkers in her dorm were calling what she knew to *be* "Pop," with the strange term, "Soda." She proceeded to call it "Pop," partly to claim her self esteem as a mid-westerner from Ohio. She was excited when her brother came to visit, looking forward to have someone else refer to the drinks as "Pop," so she would not be alone. Lo and behold, soft drinks were mentioned and she waited expectantly to hear her brother talk. Out of his mouth that night came the word, "Soda." For some reason some issues of difference in various contexts are so unimportant to some that they unconsciously adapt to a new culture without even thinking. Her brother had just absent mindedly blended in with the new culture the first night there. For others, it is significant on some issues, and it is important for these people to claim the legitimacy of their own cultural identity.