



“FOOD FIGHT”
SCRIPTURE: DEUTERONOMY 18: 15-20; 1 CORINTHIANS 8: 1-13
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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No one is quite sure how it all started so long ago. 10s of 1000s of people from all over the world are drawn to a sleepy little town of 9000 people in Spain. They come all that way to spend just one hour with total strangers on the last Wednesday of August.

What brings those throngs is about 160,000 rotten tomatoes. They are there for La Tomatina—the world’s largest food fight!

Legend has it that back in 1945 some kind of food fight started—possibly a response to a bad musician or a city councilmen that the town’s people didn’t appreciate. Some say it was as simple as a tomato truck turning over and people decided, in that time of World War and strife, to have fun with it.¹

Storefronts are covered with plastic. People wear goggles. One of the main rules is you have to squish the tomatoes before you throw them at someone so they are less likely to hurt.

They take what could have been wasted food and use it to feed a moment in time when people play and laugh and do something that makes almost no sense at all for reasons no one totally can explain.

Food is one of the most primal parts of human life—the bounty of God’s creation can feed our best possibilities. And those same basic parts of how we live and thrive can be turned to destructive purposes—with more ease than we want to admit.

Paul is worried about exactly that—the ease with which the church in Corinth is taking the basic building blocks of human life, things like eating and drinking, things like knowledge and relationships, and using them to do harm—and the most disturbing part is that they are doing this harm in the name of Christ, authorizing themselves with the freedom Paul himself had told them comes with following Jesus.

They were using the words he had taught them—but they just weren’t getting it. “We all have this knowledge.” Not so fast, Paul says—knowledge without love can

¹ <https://adventure.howstuffworks.com/destinations/parades-festivals/biggest-food-fight1.html>

quickly become arrogance. This is a theme for the Corinthian church—with such ease they take God’s good provisions to humanity and turn them toward ways to create and secure status, prestige and rank.

Remember that Corinth was a bustling town of diverse cultures, of many religions, of artisans and commerce. It was a city of excess, a city of extremes. It was a city that was a cruel place to live if you were poor—a city where status and wealth meant everything to people.

And this fight about food comes from this status-driven way the Corinthians had a knack for making everything a weapon in their striving to be better than others.

This whole idol meat controversy—well it is all about status and economics. Here’s the deal—in a status driven culture it’s all about who you know and where you’re seen. In a religiously diverse town where there were all sorts of temples and cults—some of whom still sacrificed meat to idols, they’d have big dinner parties on festival days. And the meat sacrificed to idols would be a part of the feast for the guests.

So, those parties would be a kind of who’s who in Corinth—if you were invited you didn’t turn it down. And if you were there you didn’t embarrass yourself or the host by not eating the meat. So the upper crust in the Corinthian church had a vested interest in believing that eating that idol meat was no big deal. And they looked down their noses at those who were still superstitious enough to think eating that meat could actually adversely affect your relationship with God.

Food doesn’t bring us closer to God, they said. Paul says not so fast: knowledge divorced from love creates arrogance. No one’s freedom in Christ should be a stumbling block to another person’s faith.

So, our relationship to food is a window into our relationship to God.

The Corinthians show us again and again how easily human beings can take anything and everything and turn it into a way to abuse our power, to create divisions, to hoard, to categorize, to rupture relationship.

Now before we create too much distance between the Corinthian church and ourselves, shall we take a closer look at how food functions in our country? How is food a window into the nature of our relationship with God and with each other?

There are disturbing signs all around us that food in American culture is a carrier of injustice and broken relationships:

- ◆ **Food deserts:** Millions of Americans live in areas with little to no access to fresh produce or even to a grocery store.² “Food deserts are most commonly found in communities of color and low-income areas (where many people don’t have cars).
 - Wealthy districts have three times as many supermarkets as poor ones do.
 - White neighborhoods contain an average of four times as many supermarkets as predominantly black ones do.
 - Grocery stores in African-American communities are usually smaller with less selection. People’s choices about what to eat are severely limited by the options available to them and what they can afford—and many food deserts contain an overabundance of... cheap “meat” and dairy-based foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt.³

- ◆ **Hungry Children:** 13 million children live in food insecure households in America. That statistic is based on households living under the poverty line. So, the number of children living without enough food to eat every day is much higher because of how low government sets the poverty line.⁴

- ◆ **Food waste:** It is estimated that Americans waste as much as 30-40% of our country’s food supply. Wasted food in landfills is the third leading cause of methane gas being released into the environment—one of the causes of the warming of the planet that scientists are telling us is happening at an alarming rate.⁵

- ◆ **Food generated disease:** Unhealthy diets and lack of exercise contributes to approximately **678,000 deaths** each year in the U.S., due to nutrition- and obesity-related diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and type-2 diabetes.⁶ Some stats put unhealthy diet and lack of exercise as the leading cause of death because these are the main causes of heart disease. In the last 30 years, obesity rates have **doubled** in adults, **tripled** in children, and **quadrupled** in adolescents.”

If food is a window into our relationship with God, we’re not that different than Corinth. The window into our distortion is not a temple festival with idol meat anymore. But on an even larger scale than in Corinth, in America food is classed and raced and a carrier of hierarchies and division and harm.

² <https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/desert%20stats.pdf>

³ <http://www.foodispower.org/food-deserts/>

⁴ <https://www.nokidhungry.org/who-we-are/hunger-facts>

⁵ <https://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/faqs.htm>

⁶ <https://cspinet.org/eating-healthy/why-good-nutrition-important>

This way that food can be a carrier of our distortion and broken relationships is not news to us at Grace Covenant. We have tasted the amazing ways food can heal and cultivate justice and form community.

We're the church with the Garden out front.

We're the church that provided seed money for Flori Pate to do something about food waste in Asheville and help Food Connection to be born.

We support 12 Baskets and Haywood Street's Welcome Table.

We believe in how food can be employed to cultivate justice, to humanize, to create community, to make space for people to come together and be intentional about how we share, how we dare to be vulnerable with each other, how we open ourselves up to growing that we hadn't imagined before.

How deeply have we let these things form us as Jesus followers, how have we opened ourselves up to the healing opportunities God brings to us in the most basic, primal parts of being human?

Because you see, just as food can so easily become a carrier of the worst humanity does to each other, it can become a carrier of our best possibilities. Food can fill us with life-giving, life-changing, life-generating love.

Food can bring us closer to God. It's not a legalistic way to control our relationship with God or a golden ticket to achieve righteousness. Food needs love for it to heal us. And God is yearning for us to taste that, to savor that, to cultivate that nourishing, nurturing love deep within ourselves.

Food should never be a weapon. Season it with Christ's love and food is a good medicine in a world languishing from our self-inflicted wounds. Try it! Taste and see!

- ◆ Love yourself by eating the foods that will make your body well. Honor your body's wisdom by paying attention to what foods truly give you life-sustaining energy, and what foods make you feel tired, foggy, agitated, irritated. Food is a mechanism of redemption for your own body. Don't waste the opportunity that is there for you each day to let God love you in such a life-giving way.
- ◆ Love others by sharing what you have, prepare a healthy meal for someone, sit down and eat at a table with people who are hungry for connection and community just like you are. Have lunch with a friend or share a meal with a stranger or have a feast to celebrate God's abundance and make room for more than you expect.

- ◆ Love God’s creation by eating with a moral conscience—choose justice over convenience as least once a day, choose health over habit twice a day, choose sustainability over time-saving every chance you get!
- ◆ Love the Lord who heals us, who saves us from ourselves by seeking out ways for you to use food to cultivate justice, mercy, and love.
 - Come work in our garden—that time of year is rolling around---Buzz and Rick are already out there readying things for a new season of growth.
 - Go have lunch at 12 Baskets—put on an apron and serve neighbors you may not have known you have, and pull up a chair and enjoy a meal and fellowship and let your soul be fed by it all.
 - Get involved with Food Connection—help rescue all the wasted food that gets thrown away in this town—alter your routine, create a new habit, visit a new neighborhood, put your body in proximity to practices that make food an instrument of human community instead of a wasted opportunity.
 - Go to Haywood Street’s welcome table, go to lunch at Green Opportunities, go cook at the VRQ, go sort food at ABCCM.

The world’s largest food fight for Christians isn’t about truckloads of rotten tomatoes and an hour of fun one Wednesday a year.

Our food fight as Christians is a life-time of facing down our own demons—the demons of delusion, of distortion, of self-loathing, of feeding ourselves with things that are not good for us or for others, of our penchant for taking the basic necessities of life and using them to do harm.

Paul doesn’t tell the Corinthian churches what they must do to heal. He tells them what he will do—he will not let what he eats be a stumbling block to others—he will take the impact of his actions into account, he will let Christ’s love permeate even the food on his plate. He knew his life depended on it. Do we?

Thanks be to God.