

“Love Builds Up”

January 28, 2024

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Joint worship: Presbyterian Church of Teaneck with Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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One thing that sticks out to me, as I read the epistle lesson, is how much food is a sign of freedom. There is the freedom to eat, and the freedom not to eat. The same was true in first century Corinth, when Paul wrote his letter there, and it is true today.

I'm sure that many of you have foods that you like to eat for the Fourth of July, when the US commemorates its independence from Britain. Fire up the grill! Hotdogs and hamburgers, cole slaw, potato salad, apple pie... Somehow, these are the foods that mean freedom to many Americans.

Some of the foods I grew up eating in Georgia and assumed to be generally part of Southern culture, I later learned come from agricultural and cooking traditions in Western Africa. These foods, which I had enjoyed but taken for granted, were a way that Black people expressed their freedom and cultural uniqueness from the foods and flavors that belonged to a more European ancestry.

Our church has helped an Afghan refugee couple to resettle here in Teaneck. When they first arrived, we were charged with doing some initial grocery shopping, and providing a meal. Two of us brought them out to dinner to break the fast during Ramadan— and had carefully researched a Halal restaurant, to keep with their eating requirements. They politely picked at their food, but I could see a grimace flash across their faces. It wasn't until I sat and ate a meal cooked in their home that I could notice with my mouth what freedom tastes like to them.

Our churches have a rich history of shared mission, and together for several decades worked on feeding the hungry, along with friends from Bethany Presbyterian, in their church basement through the Loaves and Fishes program. The simple act of sharing a hearty meal and a bit of hospitality can offer a moment of freedom from hunger and loneliness and other burdens of poverty. Every child of God should be entitled to the grace of a meal. Over the years, that service also enriched the lives of the volunteers, as they grew in friendship as well.

Food and freedom mattered a lot in Corinth. The wealthy class of Roman citizens frequently went to feasts and banquets with abundant meats that had been sacrificed to Roman gods. Jews, as well as those who had started to follow Jesus, could not be part of this tier of social activity, first of all because they were not among the wealthy, but also because their commitment to God's sovereignty made eating meats sacrificed to anyone other than the God of their covenant an unclean violation of the faith. That's what they had always been taught, and so they believed they were not free to eat even the more humble portions of meat cut by a butcher, because the butchers were also priests, who first sacrificed the animal before the Roman gods before butchering it. But even with these limits on their eating freedom, the choice to not eat

was theirs to make, and so exercising it was a way of announcing their freedom from gods who weren't theirs.

But Paul made the worthwhile, rhetorical argument that \*if we do not believe that the Roman gods are real, then we *should* be free to eat foods sacrificed to idols, because these idols are – from a Christian mindset– imaginary gods, and therefore are not competition to their true God. Still, Paul could see how eating meat could challenge the faith of a Christian who is still weak on this understanding. So, rhetoric aside, it is best to tend with care to each other as Christians, rather than to become pious with principles. If it is going to hurt someone's faith, Paul argued, just reach for the lentils instead of the lamb.

Last fall on our church retreat, I issued a challenge to our church. "I'd like to see if we can take a Lenten fast from disposable paper and plastic dishes this coming Lent. 40 days of bringing our own reusable coffee mugs and washing them, using real plates when we eat, and a time when we all step up a little to make sure the work of washing and cleaning does not fall on just a few people. During Lent, I wonder if we can give up a little bit of the comfort of convenience, to make this small commitment of care for God's creation."

I said this with the knowledge that when our church kitchen was renovated, someone made the executive decision to give away or throw away almost all our permanent dishes. "We don't need them anymore because we don't want to do dishes anymore," I was told. I am aware that the same group of women of a certain generation has spent decades in the kitchen, washing up after everyone else, without having another generation step up to fill their shoes. In a sense, they longed for freedom, to waltz out of church after the meal and conversation without feeling like the burden fell on them to make sure everything is tidied up. I get it.

On the other hand, I know that we are in a time when we are needing to make every effort to *not* do more damage to the earth than we already have done. As a church especially, we should be modeling care for God's creation. And if we value the earth, and we also value the work it takes to clean up, and the people who have done that work and are tired, perhaps we could consider other options than the way we have always done things; instead of the same group cleaning up, perhaps we can ask if any teens needing service hours can do this. Or maybe there are people in our community who want to earn a little money– could we consider paying someone for this kind of work? Or maybe the men of the church have some ideas?

I'm sure you have discussions like this at the Presbyterian Church of Teaneck– even if it's not around disposable dishes– which, please know I won't cast shade on if they are at Fellowship Hour– if the church in Leonia hasn't gotten there yet, I don't expect Teaneck to either. I imagine you, especially in a transition time between pastors, might have similar struggles around a shrinking number of people who pull the load, and the burden of getting tired when you've been doing your jobs for decades and cannot yet see a fresh face coming to receive the baton you've been waiting to pass so that you can rest from this portion of the race.

None of my ideas, or the lectures I gave on our Christian responsibility toward the warming planet, sparked enthusiasm from the people who usually come to the committees that make things happen in our church— or from the people who show up, but are busy with what’s going with work and family or live far from church and cannot realistically add one more thing to their schedules. In fact, since I initially proposed the idea at our church retreat of not using disposables during Lent, only one person has brought it up. And so, for the most part, I have let the idea go.

...Except then, last Thursday, we had a Deacon dinner, as we usually do the first month of the year, to welcome our new Deacons and adjust our Deacon flocks. Everyone coming to the dinner was assigned to bring food or drink, and our host asked the newest Deacon— ordained for the first time— to bring the paper plates and cups. This new deacon showed up at dinner with a rolling suitcase. “Are you moving in? Did you have a fight with your husband?” she was asked.

“You asked me to bring plates!” she explained as she unzipped her suitcase, and pulled out 12 ceramic plates, real wine glasses (though they were made of plastic), and cloth napkins in a variety of patterns and colors. We dined like royalty, and felt wrapped in love with these little touches from her home! And at the end of the meal, she neatly packed each cleared plate and glass and napkin into her suitcase, and rolled it home where she planned to wash them. This Deacon had not been at the retreat when I made the initial challenge for a disposables-free Lent. I am not sure whether she had even heard of my challenge. *But what she was able to do with her actions made such a stronger impact than any lecture this preacher could have given.* Her action makes a difference, because it was wrapped in love, rather than inflated with knowledge or moral superiority. And love builds up.

In our church a small group of us is reading the book *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* by Cole Arthur Riley. The author tells this story (pp. 12-14) from her childhood, and it reminds me of the kind of love that builds up:

“When I was eight years old... my hair started to turn gray. Course white strands shriveled up on the crown of my head without invitation, politely wrapping themselves around their black peers and strangling them in the night. It was an invasion. And the attention was agonizing. Every day I’d sit squirming and rocking in my desk, head bowed like a monk praying for my own invisibility. The gaze of Alex Demarco at my back. He’d only pointed out a hair once, but the moment stuck to me. I asked my teacher if I could switch to the empty desk in the back row, knowing there I could exhale. She said no.

By the time I turned eleven, I would spend ages in front of the mirror parting my hair just right so that as little white as possible was visible. One night, we were all going out and my family was waiting downstairs for me to finish parting. Eventually, my dad sent everyone to wait in the car and came to the bottom of the stairs and called for me.

When he asked how much longer I'd be, all of the shame that had crusted over my muscles from years of parting combusted. I threw a fit. I don't remember the details surrounding it, apart from a comb thrown against my brother's door. I mainly recall the episode by the memory of my father's face, which had a calm blankness that only made my own body, flailing and loud, more of a spectacle. When my cringing softened, I finally said, feeling more embarrassed than before, *I can't do this anymore*. And then, with certainty, *I have to dye my hair*.

My father's response, his face, still lives in me. He calmly asked me to come down from the stairs, and the low sound waves from his voice slid under my feet and flew me from that top stair to where he stood. He tucked my head into his chest, sowed a kiss into my hair, and just said, Okay, honey. We can dye your hair. I was so addled that my tears dried up, and I didn't say another word. He summoned my hair into a bun, and we walked to the car together.

...That day on the stairs, my father could've very well tried to convince me that I was beautiful, begged me to believe that my gray hair was okay. But I think he knew that in order to stand in the presence of myself and others, he needed to allow for the unnecessary. The strange thing is, we never did buy the hair dye. In fact, I never asked about it again. By the time I was in high school, the white began to go away all on its own.

What we do or do not eat is *not* what makes us free. How we wear our hair doesn't make us free. What makes us free is the love that has been shown to us through Jesus Christ. The way we come to know that love best is through one another, and through the people God sets before us on the journey. *How is it something that binds us, like love, can also free us?*

When we are bound in God's love, we realize our bodies no longer have to hold it together on our own. When God's love wraps us, we no longer have to clench so tightly. Instead, we can loosen a little; we can find our freedom; and we can open ourselves to new ways the Spirit might move in us. Any one of us, who has had the grace of a love like that, can offer it to someone else.

I pray that the sign of baptism that will follow Michael, Charlotte, and Ariel for the rest of their lives will bind them in a love like that. I know this community will help them remember and recall that love.