

Ever had a pulled-pork sandwich from Dinosaur Barbeque? Loose juicy pork, excellently seasoned in their sauce on a fresh roll; oh yeah, that's good stuff! I'll never forget the first time I actually went into Dinosaur Barbeque in Rochester. I stepped in the door and the first thing I see is that barbequing area manned by several big tattooed, hairy, sweaty guys with bandanas on their heads wearing greasy white t-shirts. I thought, "Do I really want to eat this food?" But they definitely know their stuff.

Now let's say I'm a businessman and I'm hoping to get a big contract from a company. They send a representative to check out my company and I decide to treat him to a good but laid-back lunch. I plan to take him to Dinosaur Barbeque and impress him with a pulled-pork sandwich, except when I meet him I discover that he's an Orthodox Jew. How good is my Dinosaur Barbeque idea looking?

As a Christian I have no qualms about eating pork. Like many things it's healthy in moderation, and Dinosaur Barbeque

knows how to do it right. There's absolutely nothing wrong with it, but the guest I am trying to impress will probably be offended. If I want the deal I'd better choose someplace else.

The Christians in first century Corinth were struggling with dietary issues. Corinth was a city filled with pagan religions and buildings. Archaeological digs have unearthed shrines to Apollo, Athena, Hera Acraea, Tyche, Poseidon, the Imperial Cult, Aphrodite, other unidentifiable altars, and what may be a general temple to all the gods. Animal sacrifice was a common practice among these religions. Seldom was the entire animal used for a sacrifice, only parts. The rest was sold and would often appear in local markets.

They didn't have food labelling laws in those days. You couldn't go to the local Wegmans and find a meat display labeled, "Guaranteed not to have been used in pagan sacrifice." You just didn't know. It appears as if some Corinthian Christians were bothered by this. They didn't feel right about eating meat that had been used in a pagan ritual. It was perfectly good food. Paul says the pagan gods aren't real anyway and so nothing actually happened to defile the meat.

But, he warns those who have no problem with the meat to exercise their freedom with love. If someone around them is offended by the practice, then don't do it either. The loving thing to do is to honor their feelings.

Now this may seem silly in today's world, so let's make the idea more meaningful. Let's say that I'm hosting a Super Bowl party at my house tonight. I've invited all my neighbors. I decide the best food I could possibly have around would be a couple great big platters of pulled pork from Dinosaur Barbeque. Further, let's say I find that the best way to complement a pulled pork sandwich in my left hand is to have a beer in my right hand. So I get a cooler set up with beer.

There's nothing wrong an alcoholic beverage in and of itself - especially if you are a Lutheran of German descent. However, let's say I have a neighbor who struggles with an alcohol addiction. Now is there something wrong with a pulled pork sandwich in one hand and a beer in the other? Quite possibly. I can choose to not invite my neighbor so everyone else can enjoy their beer without fear. Or, I may choose to

forgo the alcohol, invite my neighbor, and let him or her have a good time without the tension.

Let's tweak it a bit more. Let's say my neighbor is an Orthodox Jew who is a recovering alcoholic. What is the most loving thing to do then?

Just think for a minute. If you want to have a neighborhood party, and your neighborhood has people of Jewish faith, and people who are Mormons, and people who struggle with alcohol addictions your food choices start to get pretty limited. You've chucked out beer, wine, pulled pork, cheeseburgers, bacon or ham on salads, coffee, chocolate, Coke, Pepsi or any drink with caffeine, and maybe more. You as a Lutheran are welcome to eat just about anything that won't outright poison you. But if you want to celebrate with your neighbors and show them the loving hospitality and openness of a Christian you're going to be pretty limited.

There's a boy on my street who was allergic to just about everything when he was a little kid. Inviting him to one of my kids birthday parties meant either not letting him have cake or

creating a cake that avoided his allergens. I succeeded in coming up with such a cake, but I'll tell you, it didn't taste like much!

Christianity has long been perceived as a religion of sour-faced righteous people who turn their noses up at everything fun. In fact Christianity is an open religion that gives incredible freedom - as long as that freedom is exercised in love. That is the point of Paul's words that we read as our second Bible reading.

Martin Luther wrote a paper called "The Freedom of a Christian" and in it he said, "A Christian in a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

That is the tension we live in. Because of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord we know that we have God's grace. That grace gives us freedom from sin and freedom from countless rules and regulations. You know well that you cannot legislate morality. A religion about rules is a religion where people will always try to find loopholes and exceptions - sort of like

tax law or campaign finance reform. A religion of love - not romantic love but self-giving love where you invest yourself in the betterment of others - is a religion that both frees and confines.

Jesus summed up the whole thing at the Last Supper, "I give you a new commandment. Love one another as I have loved you." Simple enough.

Enjoy the freedom you have as a Christian. In these days of Christian faith often being portrayed as stodgy, out-of-touch, hypocritical, and kind of pathetic, we need to let the world see our freedom - the joy, wholeness, and contentment that living in God's eternal value can bring to this earthly life. But we do so with a constant recognition that our freedom cannot offend others or destroy their faith. Christians aren't hedonists either. Ultimately our faith should bring comfort, peace and invitation to others. We need to embody the love of our Lord, our Savior. As he showed he was a free lord of all, subject to none, but also a dutiful servant of all, subject to all. Amen