

# I Say Po-tay-to and You Say Po-tah-to

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January 29, 2012, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Lately I've been pondering what varieties of potatoes to plant this year. I am somewhat of a potato aficionado, and like to experiment a bit. Along with some Yukon Golds and some Pontiacs, I like some different types. Most years I plant some kind of fingerling potatoes, which produce long thin tubers, and something with some color, usually pink, inside.

Some people might think I'm a little odd because of my fondness for odd varieties of potatoes, but I'm better off now than I would have been in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In that century, potatoes were part of the so-called "Columbian Exchange;" that is, they were one of the items that went from America to Europe or vice versa. And potatoes were not exactly welcomed in the old country.

Many were suspicious, but a few went so far as to suggest that the potato was an instrument of Satan. Since God had not mentioned spuds in the Bible, some clergy preached that the vegetable was the Devil's handiwork. People were also frightened by the outward appearance of the gnarly vegetable. Since it looked like a leper's hand, rumors began to spread that potatoes caused leprosy, kind of like the mythical link between toads and warts.

I, for one, am thankful that attitudes toward the potato have improved. Life these days would be hard to imagine without fried, scalloped, boiled or mashed taters. But the suspicion toward and slow acceptance of the potato is a reminder that something that seems innocuous to us may once have been highly controversial.

Another example would be that silverware staple, the fork. Believe it or not, the fork was once considered quite scandalous. In the year 1004, the Greek niece of the Byzantine emperor used a golden fork at her wedding feast in Venice. The fork was seen as sinfully decadent by local clergy. "God in his wisdom has provided man with natural forks—his fingers," one of the disdainful Venetians said. "Therefore it is an insult to him to substitute artificial metal forks for them when eating." When the bride died of the plague a few years later, one church leader opined that it was God's punishment for her hateful vanity.

Well, now, let's see . . . we have potatoes, we have forks. What else do we need? How about some meat? Yes, meat was also controversial at certain points in history for various reasons. One of those reasons is involved in the text we heard read this morning from 1 Corinthians 8. The Apostle Paul finds himself in the middle of a squabble between factions of the church in Corinth who have had a falling out over eating meat, among other things.

This is a very interesting text because in it Paul is careful not to take sides, but must nonetheless reach some kind of conclusion. A little background may make it all a bit clearer. In the ancient world, only the wealthy could afford a steady diet of meat. Most folks subsisted primarily on fruits, vegetables and grains. Meat was special, and for many the most common opportunity to eat meat was at a festival or feast at which they were an invited guest.

Much of the meat that was sold and consumed in the Roman world originated from animal sacrifices made in pagan temples. Often, only a small portion of the animal that was killed had to be burnt as an offering. The remainder of the carcass was either served as part of a banquet there in the temple precincts, or offered for sale with the proceeds supporting the priests.

For the early Christians, this created a conundrum of sorts. Avoiding participation in pagan religion was important, but what exactly constituted “participation”? Some argued that since there was only one true God, revealed in Jesus, that it didn’t hurt anything to go with your neighbor or cousin to a pagan temple to share in a banquet. If the pagan gods aren’t real, where is the harm?

Others, however, saw danger in this practice. As they saw it, you were participating in pagan religion in one sense, regardless of what you might be thinking about. And for that matter, anyone looking on would assume you were participating 100%. And that might cause confusion if the person who saw you knew you were a Christian.

Some people were even more concerned. They thought that whatever came into contact with a pagan ritual was somehow tainted, so that even if you just bought meat at the temple and brought it home, a Christian should still not eat it. Apparently, the “evil” associated with the pagan temple was contagious.

To us, this may all seem silly, but to the Corinthian believers it was absolutely serious. In our part of the world, there aren’t many pagan temples making animal sacrifice, so we don’t have to worry about it, though some Christians in other parts of the world still do. But I think there is an important message in this text for us, not about meat *per se*, but about how we handle controversy and disagreement in the church, in our families, and sometimes even in our communities and in the world.

Part of the message Paul is trying to get across is that there can be good reasons not to do something you really want to even when that something isn’t objectively wrong. Now that is a countercultural idea these days. These days, with all the emphasis on rights and individual liberty, most people would say that anyone who wants to do something that isn’t against the law has every right to do it and other people should just “mind their own business.”

In his treatment of the topic, Paul often quotes the slogans of one side or the other, and so it is not hard to imagine him appropriating the suggestion that everybody should just mind their own business. But what he would have gone on to say, I think, is that we need to remember what “business” we are in. He would have told the Corinthians, “You are not in the meat eating business. You are not in the proving others wrong business. As followers of Jesus, you are in the ‘love one another’ business. So mind *that* business.”

The business of loving others is God’s own business: “For God so loved the world, he sent his only son.” Loving others was Jesus’ business. He caused controversy because he did not confine his compassion to those others felt were deserving of it. Instead, he loved everybody – sinners and Samaritans, lepers and tax collectors, the high and mighty and the weak and lowly.

To love is to will the good of others. It is not only to want others to be well and to flourish, but to be willing to exert ourselves or even to sacrifice so that they might flourish. That’s the point Paul is making about the meat. Maybe, in some abstract sense, eating meat sacrificed to idols is okay. But in practical terms, look at what effect it is having on the people you are supposed to love. Technically, you may have a “right” to eat meat, but there is often a difference between having a right and doing what is right.

A while back, I heard an amazing story about a young man who understood the difference between having a right and doing right. Allan Guei was a star basketball player at Compton High School in California. A Hollywood screenwriter and his friends got the idea to offer a special free-throw competition among the Compton High seniors with a GPA over 3.0.

Guei entered the contest with seven other students, and won the top prize of \$40,000 in scholarship money.

A few weeks later, Allan Guei learned that he would also receive a full-ride basketball scholarship to Cal State – Northridge. According to NCAA rules, he could accept the athletic scholarship and keep most of the \$40,000. He'd won the contest fair and square, and the NCAA said it was okay, so he had every right to keep the money. But the young man didn't dwell on what he had a right to do; instead, he thought about how he could do the right thing.

And this is what he did: he went to his principal and asked him to make a special announcement at the graduation ceremony. Allan Guei was going to give each of the seven other contestants in the free-throw contest an equal share of the \$40,000. Guei explained, "I've already been blessed so much and I know we're living with a bad economy, so I know this money can really help my classmates. It was the right decision."

Paul would have appreciated Allan Guei, because he understood the difference between having rights and doing right. That's what Paul was asking the Corinthians to think about. Stop thinking about what you want and what you can get, and start thinking about the difference you can make in this world and how you can live in a way that makes the world better. Start thinking about ways you can help even those with whom you disagree to flourish, and to become stronger, and how you can help the whole community be better.

A little later in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he tries to define what love is, and one of the things he says is, "Love doesn't insist on its own way." No doubt one thing he had in mind when he said that was this conflict in chapter 8 over eating meat. Love doesn't say, "My way or the highway." Love doesn't say, "Leave me alone and mind your own business." Love says, "We're in this together. What can I do to strengthen us all? What can I do to encourage others and show them I care, even if we don't agree?"

In a world where the divisions only seem to get deeper every day, where even Christians are increasingly divided and polarized, we need this message from Paul more than ever. We need to take it to heart, and live it out. We have to be vigilant in our resistance to the attitude which says that the point of life is to get our own way, or to prove that we are right and others are wrong. *The point of life is to discover that we are loved, and then to love one another.*

"Love one another" -- that's the business we're in. Let's mind our business.

Amen.