

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany
January 28, 2024

“The Flavor of Faith”
1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

You are what you eat, or so the saying goes. There may be something to that, even as it applies to ice cream. Ah, ice cream – a necessity of life that’s made it into the movies more than once. *Here are a few short clips.*

I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream! A study sponsored by – who else – Baskin Robbins found that *how* we eat our ice cream says a lot about us. Here are some of the results, which I’d suggest taking with a dash of salt (or, better yet, a generous shot of chocolate sauce.)

- People who like to eat their ice cream on a cone are idealists who lead with their hearts.
- People who prefer ice cream sundaes are open, passionate loyalists who take calculated risks.
- People who eat ice cream out of the carton are resourceful, pragmatic introverts who can be strong leaders.
- Finally, for all of you milkshake lovers out there, you're young at heart, fearless, athletic, and prone to take impulsive risks.

So much for *how* we eat our ice cream. *What* ice cream do we eat? To find out, I took a completely unscientific poll on our church's Facebook page and asked folks what their favorite ice cream flavor was.

Let's look at the top four and see what, according to a December 2022 article on the website *thekitchn*, they say about those who love them.

- Vanilla came in number one. You, my friends, appreciate superior quality and simplicity, aren't anxious or stressed, and find peace and balance in the everyday.
- Butter pecan came in a close second. According to Edy's Ice Cream, butter pecan lovers are devoted, conscientious, and respectful. You have lofty standards of right and wrong and don't like hurting people's feelings.
- Various varieties of cookie dough came in third. Back to *thekitchn*, now, whose survey found that those who picked this flavor as their fave are resourceful, crafty, and drawn to bright colors and big patterns. You're not overly loud or obnoxious, and you love dogs.

- Chocolate lovers came in fourth. You're opinionated people who lead a life of joy and self-love. Still, you're also open to exploring ideas and experiences different from your own.

Again, take all these survey results with a healthy slug of chocolate syrup.

They're more for fun than anything else.

We'd never discriminate against people because of their favorite ice cream flavor, right? We wouldn't say, "They're *never* coming into this house again! They asked for *pistachio* ice cream!!" We argue about and discriminate against enough people and things without adding ice cream to the list.

Still, something along those lines happened in Corinth. *What* people ate and *where* they ate it threatened to split the church.

Tradition in Greece was to sacrifice an animal to a pagan god, burn some of the meat on the altar, and then eat some of it yourself. Temples then sold the rest of the animal to the meat market. Those merchants, in turn, resold it to the public. Most meat folks ate followed that route. For most Corinthians, it wasn't a big deal.

For some Christians, though, it was a *huge* deal. What's worse, those pagan pot roasts popped up all over the place. They were in the market, in the homes of friends and neighbors, and served at public celebrations.

What were Corinthian Christians to do? They didn't want to eat food many thought belonged, if not to the devil, then at least to his close relatives. But they didn't want to shut themselves off from their neighbors or community life, either.

Paul first reminded the Corinthians that idols are figments of pagan imagination. He knew, though, that some Christians were going to get holy heartburn if they saw their Christian neighbors at meals in pagan temples or eating meat that came from those pagan temples.

Paul warned Christians in the Corinthian church to "take care that this liberty of yours doesn't somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." The "weak" in this case were those new to the faith who hadn't yet given up all their old ways of thinking.

Paul said, "If food is a cause of their falling, I'll *never* eat meat, so that I don't cause even *one* of them to fall." Disciples who love, in other words, never purposely go out of their way to make another Christian stumble and fall. How can we keep that from happening today?

Loving behavior starts with not being selfish or rude. It isn't as easy as it sounds. Society has tossed civility and thoughtfulness out the window. So much of

what we see and hear is about getting ahead, controlling the conversation, and winning no matter what the cost.

That may be the case in the world, business, or politics, but it's not how things work here, in the body of Christ. The church isn't about you or me. It's about God and neighbor. Do something to prove it, even if it's something small.

Pray, read your Bible, worship, and volunteer. Recycle your trash. Hold your tongue. Wait your turn. Don't interrupt. Give until it hurts, and then give a little more.

Visit a neighbor or someone homebound or ill. Put others' feelings ahead of your own. *Do something, anything, to remind yourself that it isn't all about you.*

Here in the church, we aren't going to vote alike or raise our kids alike. We'll have different ideas about how to spend – or *not* spend – our money.

When it comes to food, we won't all like or eat the same things. We'll disagree about how to play, how to learn, and sometimes about who people love and marry.

Part of what makes us UCC is that we *live* with our differences rather than letting them *divide* us. We talk to those who don't believe as we do instead of calling them names. We respect them and learn from them rather than arguing with them.

Human nature being what it is, of course, we often don't meet those lofty goals. But, as Christians, Christ calls us to try. And that leads to my last point.

If you don't want to be a stumbling block, remember that *everyone* is a sinner for whom Christ died. *Everyone includes you*. Jesus didn't give up eating meat; he gave up his life for you and for me.

Let's take care, friends, that we don't sin against Jesus by wounding others' faith, causing them to stumble or fall.

Better yet, let's be the one helping them back up, so we can walk the path of faith together, whatever flavor we favor.