

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

"Letting Go of the Leftovers"

I Corinthians 8: 1-13

February 5, 2006

The inside of my fridge is a good bit like the churches I've been a part of... There's a lot of good, nourishing, tasty stuff in there. Sometimes you have to nose around a little bit to find it but if you open your eyes and look and are patient you can generally find what it is you need.

There's a little bit of everything in our fridge, including leftovers... we always have some leftovers.

Anybody here ever have "root hog" night? That's where you just try to get the fridge cleaned out by eating all the stuff you've been collecting... "root hog or die"... as they say... every Burleson for him or herself.

It does make for an interesting mealtime because you never know what's going to be on the menu, right?

In the first place, most of our leftovers are in old butter tubs so you can't really tell what's in there. Usually we open it up and see if we can recognize it... sometimes you can.

Then... then you give it a good sniff to see if it's safe... sometimes, we do a communal sniff and take a vote. **"I don't know... what do you think?"**

Well... you put everything that smells okay out on the table and then create some dinner destined for the microwave.

A little broccoli and cheese casserole... with a rib from the Uncle Dan's you picked up last week... a few English peas that have one new potato that made it's way in there somehow. And... a little bit of Chicken Ramono you brought home from Johnny Carinos.

That's a classic "root hog" plate at the Burleson home.

And it's not a bad picture of the churches I've been a part of. A little of this and a little of that.

Dealing with leftovers is something every church must do. They had to in Corinth... and literally... it was leftovers.

The church in Corinth was growing as Christianity began to spread and as people from all walks of life and all sorts of backgrounds came into the faith.

People were coming into the church who had previously been worshipping down the street in the temple to some other god... where they would make offerings, meat sacrifices to these idols. This was the religious way of the ancient world... to please the god of your choice by offering up a sacrifice.

It's important to visualize... see this. Often there would be, just outside the temple, several dining rooms that opened up to a public courtyard, which might have various booths. The fare at these eating establishments was the meat that had just been on the altar inside the temple. ... A first century food court of sorts.

And whatever the gods didn't want was eaten there or sold to make a little profit on the side.

Well, now the church pews were being filled up with folks who had formerly worshipped these idols and had eaten at these restaurants. And then they'd somehow met Christ and moved into a new faith.

It was a wonderful new life for them, a life devoid of idol worship and all that sacrificing. None of that for them.

But a funny thing happened on the way home from church... a disturbing thing. They had to walk by the temple food court... and it wasn't pleasant but it was the only way home.

And on this particularly Sunday they were shocked to look up and see the chairman of the finance committee eating at Whatasacrifice, one of the restaurants run by the pagan temple.

And then they turned around and saw a whole table full from the Sunday School class at chowing down at McOfferings.

You can imagine the visceral kind of response they had. To them eating this meat was sin because it was like participating in another religion. You might as well be worshipping the idol itself and here were these church leaders, mature people of faith, having Sunday pagan brunch.

“It was hypocrisy.

It was idolatry.

And you can bet the deacons were going to hear about this.”

But when these new believers began to report the incident to various deacons they were shocked to find that some of them also ate meat that had previously been offered to idols.

One of them had a teenage son that was flipping idolburgers at the “God in a Box”.

They just couldn't believe it. Even the pastor was guilty, contending that you could buy this second hand meat at half the regular price and that on his meager salary that was really great savings.

Remember now that many in this church, many of these meat-eaters had been just recently freed up from all the legalism of the faith of their childhood. They'd grown up...

Never having pork in their beans

Or bacon with their eggs...

Or milk with their meat... as the Levitical code prohibits.

They knew Leviticus 11 by heart; memorized it in Vacation Bible School; they knew what animals were clean and which were unclean. And this was never just a dietary issue but always a liturgical one... it was spiritual truth... In worship, YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT. Or "you were."

This new gospel had changed all of that and taken them to a new level of faith, one that wasn't centered in rules and regulations but in a living, loving Lord.

And you know how it feels to be freed up from those kinds of restraints and you know how it feels for the world to open up spiritually to new truth and new possibilities. You know what a rush it can be to feel "enlightened" and these folks at Corinth felt enlightened.

And they were all down at the temple restaurant, dining in front of those who were new to God's ways and new to the gospel story.

There were lots of leftovers in this church... butter tubs everywhere... Some filled with fear about anything that resembled “the world” and other tubs were filled with reaction towards anything that seemed like that “ole’ time religion”

... And, in First Church Corinth, lots of noses were being turned up.

What's a church to do... with its leftovers? What are we to do with ours? We have them, you know. Every church does. All sorts of leftovers that we've brought to this place... The stuff in some of our tubs is so old it's hard to recognize...

Some of it's easier to identify. ... Leftovers that we bring with us to church... meaning to or not.

One leftover that I've brought and identified is called, "fundaphobia." It's the leftover some of us have who spent a lifetime resisting, reacting to, and fighting against fundamentalism.

Not a bad thing to have resisted, reacted to, or fought against but having done it all our lives the problem now is we tend to see a fundamentalist behind every bush. There are butter tubs full of "fundaphobia"...

That's just one example of a leftover.

Here's another... I occasionally see... successism. It's a leftover from a materialistic, consumer-driven culture that folks bring to church sometimes, so that they need their church to be "successful". How many? How big? How relevant? Are we okay, as good, better? You know, stuff Jesus cares a lot about...

How about that butter tub that is full of evangelical certainty? **"We know... we know who's in and who's out... who's right and who's wrong... how a real follower of Jesus votes."**

Anyone ever found you carrying that leftover? Maybe where you see a secularist behind every bush.

Or how about the butter tub that is filled with modernity... enlightenment. There's one a lot of us carry. It's a leftover that's really hard to recognize and some of us bring it with us here and all of the assumptions that go with it, like...

"Nothing is more important than the individual."

"Newer is always better."

"The only thing you can know is what you can prove."

"Reason and rationality are always in conflict with faith and always trump mystery and the supernatural."

There are so many leftovers, aren't there? And we all have something... And by the way, generally you can spot my leftovers and I can spot yours more easily than we can spot our own.

And that's also true with those butter tubs in this room that are unique to each of us... Your story. Leftovers from your past.

Someone hurt you... And that was real.

It's a painful leftover.

We all have something...

There was an episode in your life...

a missed opportunity...

... a dream shattered.

You got any leftovers that look like that? Maybe from a bad child experience? Got used up by a church? ... got tired? Got burned... got bored? Got left out? Or, is the butter tub from further back in the fridge? Got chosen last one too many times for playground kickball? Is there busyness in your butter tub? Or battles? Or bitterness about something?

And now you're here with that... and here we are together... and what we know is that when we're together all of our leftovers are pulled out on the table and it's root hog at DaySpring. That's just the way it goes in communities.

And we may not realize it but...

What we hear, what we hear in light of those leftovers.

We react the way we do... interpreting things a certain way. In light of...

We size each other up... reduce each other down and react...

"Can you believe their eating that meat offered to idols... must be liberals."

“Those folks are so narrow-minded... its just meat for goodness sakes.”

“Can you believe they vote democrat... must not take the bible seriously.”

“Listen to that god-talk... they must not be real deep thinkers.” See that butter tub?

Or a person who’s that free with her piety must not be very intelligent. Butter tub

“No one on the staff ever asks me to help. They don’t even know my name.” Butter tub

“I can’t offer my opinion in front of those folks.” Butter tub.

“Is our preacher a catholic wannabe?” Butter tub

Butter tubs... all of them... leftovers. And we can see them and there’s the difficult grace of community.

Paul writes to the folks at Corinth and in part of his letter he tries to help them deal with this. **“About that meat offered to idols...”** And the way you deal with it is by love.

Paul changes the focus of the conversation. It’s not about leftovers any longer... it’s about love... and whether or not love is in the proper place in their lives. They wrote him asking for an answer... the theological low-down. He wrote them back and said that, really, they were the answer... by being righteous, not right.

Oh... he does offer an opinion. **“We know that meat wasn’t offered to a god since there is only one God... so it’s not a problem with God if we eat it.”** He offers his belief but his belief is bracketed by love.

Historically in the church, we’ve had that backwards. We’ve surrounded our love with our thinking... **“Get your thinking straight, your beliefs straight, and then we’ll talk about love.”** In I Corinthians 8... the doctrine is bracketed by love.

On one side of his theology is the love of God. And Paul does a little spiritual epistemology... how we know things.

And what he says is that we don’t really know the truth until we are in love with God. There is a level of learning that only comes from loving. That other kind of knowing just “puffs you up” it’s all about the ego... the selfish self. **“The one who loves God”** Paul contends, **“Is known by God... is intimate with God”**

We know the truth about God by loving God... and by loving God see the world correctly and ourselves more clearly.

We see our leftovers so that we can begin to let go of them. When we love God, we’re loving Perfect Love... the Source of all Love... and so fear is gone and we don’t have to live such defended lives.

We don’t have to see ourselves as separate from everyone else... in comparison with everyone. There’s no more “us and them” when we know correctly.

We can see nothing clearly a part from loving God and loving God changes how we see everything... even those arrogant meat-eaters... even those conservatives who won’t touch the stuff. Even our enemies.

So, one side of Paul’s opinion is love of God. And the backside is love of the other. After Paul tells them what he thinks... he tells them what he does. He loves... that’s the deeper wisdom. **“What I care about is how I impact this other person. Am I helping her to grow in her relationships to the Infinite God? That’s what I want to know. And, if I’m tripping her up...it’s a no brainer...I’ll be a vegetarian.”**

That’s what is more true than theology about meat or anything else. **You are more true. My real doctrine is revealed in how I relate to you.** Paul invites us to care about one another more than debating one another and winning over one another. Because if we do win... we’ve lost. Every win is a loss for our true and authentic selves. To defeat you is to defeat me. We both die a little.

But when we rescue another with our love we rescue ourselves. We come to life... only when we love. **“Without love,”** Paul says, **“We’re nothing.”** Remember chp. 13-I may be this or that, but with out love, its nothing. And John would add, **“But when we love, we are born of God.”**

So... when we love God we let go of our leftovers... and when we love others we let go of theirs. And that’s how we deal with all these butter tubs in the room... and that’s exactly how we grow up. No progress on the journey is made with out love. There’s only one yard stick and it says love on the side. Can I let got of my stuff for the sake of someone else? And if I can...if we can...

Then, “root hog” is transformed into a feast of sharing... Our selfish grabbing becomes an agape meal... And some old stuff is discarded...some seen for the delusion that it is...And that, that feast of love, is the nourishment your soul is needing and what the world is starving for and what Christ died to offer us.

Copyright, Burt L. Burleson, 2006