

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

During the forty days of Lent, I used to put myself on a strict diet: total vegetarian, though not vegan; no alcohol or sweet desserts, and no caffeine. I followed that Lent regimen for about 25 years. By the time Good Friday arrived each year, I felt great. I lost weight and increased freedom, gaining a peacefulness that helped me through those days.

Eventually I gave up giving up all those things for various reasons. For example, I discovered that in the days before Ash Wednesday, I was binge eating sweets, and that was not good for me. Then when Easter came, eventually my former diet returned. I also discovered that my Lenten penance became other people's Lenten penance. When someone invited me over to eat, I'd pass on the barbecue they spent hours preparing, or have them fix everyone at the table a grilled cheese sandwich as their main course. Now I usually just eat healthy during Lent in hopes that those habits will stay with me after Easter arrives.

Even so, I try talking myself into eating or drinking something I shouldn't. I'll argue, "Well, today is a special occasion," even though, as a priest, I'm celebrating somebody's special occasion almost every day. Or I'll presume that the people I'm with expect me to eat or drink certain items or a quantity of certain items for the sake of friendship. It takes self-discipline to eat the right way.

St. Paul knew this, but he also knew of a bigger picture. Some of the rules for eating and drinking in his day affected his ministry. Many people who heard him weren't allowed to eat certain things, but people are people, so they probably, on occasion, did. And so did Paul. In today's excerpt from First Corinthians, he rises above the fray to say, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." Paul didn't care what people thought; God's judgment mattered to him. Evading social conventions offended some people, yet Paul strove to loosen the rules based on this higher goal of giving glory to God. He writes, "Avoid giving offense, whether to the Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in every way... that they may be saved." If eating the food someone else offered would establish a connection, Paul accepted the deal: he would open his mouth if they would open their ears. What you eat matters, but so do the benefits of conversation and good manners.

As you think about your Lenten penances this week, you'll certainly wonder about food and drink. The Catholic Church has rules of abstinence: if you're over the age of 14, no meat on Ash Wednesday nor on any of the Fridays of Lent. There is no upper age limit to that restriction. We also have rules of fasting: Those between the ages of 18 and 59 limit the quantity of food they eat on two days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. These rules apply even this year, no matter who is your Valentine or what is the final score of the Super Bowl.

If you'd like to do something, not just give up something, please consider a study we are offering, "Jesus in the Eucharist." Our deacons will present these seven sessions. You may come on Tuesday nights or on Thursday afternoons starting this week. The same study is being offered in parishes across the country as part of this year's Eucharistic Revival. Make this a Lent to remember. Do it for the glory of God.