

The piece of Christ

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The prevailing topic of conversation at my mother's retirement home is the food: the menu, the cooks and—not least—the order in which people are served. While I tire of hearing about the daily drama, I know that what is true at "the home" is true for many of the rest of us. Like the Gentiles, we spend too much time and energy wondering what we shall eat and what we shall drink.

According to Frederick Buechner, gluttony is "going to the refrigerator trying to satisfy a spiritual hunger." It's something more sinister than simply overeating—it means giving disproportionate attention to matters of food. This means that gluttony can be a problem even among those who do not eat much, whether for fear of toxins or to avoid weight gain or for some other reason. If eating is too much on our minds, this is a problem. At least that's the way Paul sees it in 1 Corinthians 6.

He has things to say about sex too, but I don't see this text as superficial moralizing, with Paul as a fussy old saint telling us not to eat too much or have too much sex. Paul gets read that way sometimes, as if he were a curmudgeon, a grouchy great uncle in a threadbare black suit sitting in the corner of the family room. (It would be rude not to invite him but no one really listens to him.)

Instead, let's interpret Paul through the lens of grace rather than law, from the positive on which the negative counsel is founded. As Kathleen Norris suggests, we should resist interpreting "celibacy" as a repressive and unhealthy word denoting puritanical prohibitions. Better to read it as a prophetic word for our sex-saturated culture, to see celibacy as a mature spiritual determination to love everyone the same exact way, whether male or female, young or old. Celibacy, Norris suggests, is similar to purity of heart: loving as Jesus loved.

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A young mother in my congregation told me that on a recent Sunday, when I invited people to observe the Pax Christi, her son turned to her and said, "What am I supposed to do with a 'piece of Christ'?"

The phrase has haunted me ever since. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:27 that "you are the Messiah's body and individual parts of it," an idea he anticipates in this week's reading. So along with an intramural reflection—how we are to regard one another—we have an extramural consideration: how we are to regard ourselves in relation to the corruptions and idolatries of the world.

To be holy is to be "set apart," distinct from the world's values and corruptions. To be enslaved to largesse in any form—and food and sex may be the most pervasive—is to forget who we are and how we got that way.

By grace we not only receive and share the peace of Christ but are also pieces of the Christ, the hands and feet and the face and tongue of Jesus.