

Eating what is set before you

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I lived in Japan for three years and never ate raw horse meat, although I heard that it was a delicacy in the region where I lived. It was called *basashi*, I heard, and kept wondering if there would be a time when I would have to swallow my revulsion and taste it. But it never happened.

There were new and strange foods, though, and I learned that it was part of being a missionary to learn to eat things I had never tasted before, to accept hospitality as well as to provide it. Being a missionary was not about being in charge all of the time. It was about learning to live in a strange place, and eat new things with chopsticks and humility. I'll be honest, there were times when I would have identified with Peter—being offered a meal, and wanting to shrink away and say, "Oh no, Lord, I would never eat that! It can't be right to eat that!"

I remember the first time I bit down on something deep-fried, only to be told that it was *taco*—octopus. It was OK, actually, after the initial shock of picturing an octopus tentacle passed over me. I also remember the surprise of tasting wasabi (Japanese horseradish) for the first time. Many times I learned that a new food that I did not want to try was a gourmet dish and an act of extravagant hospitality.

But of course—Peter's reticence was more than cultural. These are foods that God had commanded him not to eat. This was about obedience to God, not just cultural preference or being a picky eater. And the lesson here is not so much about the food as it is about people—just as it was when I became a missionary in Japan. It is about what we eat, but more than that, who we eat with—who we allow ourselves to eat with, to associate with, to worship with, to live with.

While we have learned to eat different kinds of ethnic foods these days, we are more divided than ever—by race and class and language. I remember the first time I helped serve a free meal through an organization called Loaves and Fishes. While I was very comfortable ladling the food, serving food, I became uncomfortable when someone told me to go and sit and eat with the people I was serving. I have to ask

myself why. I don't like the answer.

I like to think that both Peter and Cornelius were transformed through their encounter: both by the love of God. I know that this was true of me, long ago in Japan. Though I thought I was going to serve in God's name and to tell of God's love, I ended up being expanded myself. I ate what was set before me, with humility and chopsticks. I learned to be loved at the same time I was learning more and more what it meant to love.

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