

When traveling through the South, you might come across a confection known as “divinity.” It has been around more than 100 years and probably originated in the South because pecans were frequently used in the recipe. Corn syrup was a popular sugar substitute in the 1900s, and divinity candy was one of its creative uses.

One maker of “Old Fashioned Pecan Divinity” gushes that “these wonderful confections are like a taste of heaven.” But no one knows for certain how the white candy got its name. Perhaps someone was meddling in the kitchen, stuck their finger in the goo and tasted it, and thereupon pronounced it “simply divine.”

The white candy treat, according to Wikipedia, “is a nougat-like confection made with whipped egg whites, corn syrup, and sugar. Optional ingredients such as flavors, chopped dried fruit and chopped nuts are frequently added.” And why is this important?

Because food is a huge factor in healthy relationships — both human and divine. As Proverbs 16:24 declares, Food is like honey — “sweetness to the soul and healthy to the body.” Food has the power to calm a troubled spirit, a peace that’s supernaturally serene, like an autumn leaf floating downstream. Food is an integral aspect of our social interactions. “The best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” It’s an old adage, but still rings true. The best way to a woman’s heart is similar, but often involves chocolate.

Are you having relationship troubles? Producing your loved one’s favorite food is sure to help. But what about your relationship with God? Is food involved? Well, in ancient Israel, one might bring a prize heifer, an ox, a lamb or a pair of turtle doves as an offering that might serve not only as a sacrifice, but later, as a meal for the priests. Food for Yahweh also included grain offerings from which flatbread cakes might be made.

Jesus himself was known as *agnus Dei*, and in the sacrament of the eucharist, we consume his body and the blood, which in early Christianity led to unfounded rumors that followers of Christ practiced cannibalism. So, there's strong evidence to suggest that for millennia, we mortals have believed that the gods are appeased and pacified with some good food. And at the core of our faith, there's a vigorous theological notion that lifts up Jesus as the ultimate food sacrifice to quell an angry God separated from humanity because of sin.

John Wesley famously thought that cleanliness was "next to godliness," but that did not settle the question of how one can best get close to God. Which begs the question, what does it take for God to consider us BFFs and what are the ingredients of a divine recipe guaranteed to bring us closer to Him? The short, quick answer according to Paul is that "Food will not bring us close to God."

New Testament scholars agree that the apostle was crazy smart. He was a Pharisee, which means he knew Jewish law inside and out, and he admits that he was "advanced in Judaism beyond many among his people of the same age." Paul was taught and mentored by Gamaliel, a doctor of Jewish law, and an eminent Jewish scholar who sat on the Sanhedrin, the highest court of justice in Judaism and similar to our Supreme Court. He himself may have sat on the Sanhedrin, although this is not certain.

Yet, the apostle, who would do more to influence the Christian faith and shape its theology than any other person, had a dim view of knowledge. "Knowledge puffs up," he wrote. "Anyone who claims to know something, does not yet have the necessary knowledge."

At that time the church at Corinth was arguing about whether Christians could in good conscience purchase and eat food that had been first offered to the gods in the temple that loomed over their city. And what's important as we explore his letter is not the apostle Paul's answer, but rather the fact that everyone had an

opinion that had already been mixed, stirred, and baked and was now hard as concrete.

In fact, sometimes we forget that having opinions, as did every member of the Corinthian church, does not make our opinions valid. For example, in the opinion of many...George Washington had wooden teeth. You need to drink at least eight glasses of water every day. You'll get cramps if you go swimming right after you eat. We only use 10% of our brains. You swallow eight spiders a year while sleeping.

Let's face it, we believe what we believe, don't we? We forget that opinions are not facts. We forget that what we believe to be the truth does not necessarily mean it is a fact. According to the Pew Research Center, we have trouble distinguishing between a fact and an opinion — the latter often confused with the former.

Might we consider that it is okay *not* to have an opinion? After all, you might say that to adopt an opinion without doing serious research is lazy, easy, and a cop-out. It is far better to acknowledge this, and simply say that you're not familiar with the issue, and cannot form an intelligent opinion, and therefore will not offer one that might only contribute to the confusion. In cases like this, it is better, as the adage goes, to keep our mouths shut and let people think we're foolish, than to open our mouths and remove all doubt.

In reading Paul's letter, it is easy to wonder if the Corinthian Christians believed that they were entitled to their opinions about food offered to idols. In fact, upon further observation one gets the feeling that the apostle Paul thinks they were not so entitled! And maybe we aren't either with our thoughts that the rules don't always apply to us or that our faith in Christ provides us with certain leniencies. After all, too many people, Christians included, are like the Queen in

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* who declares, "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!"

Ok, so what than does bring us closer to God? Not food. Not divinity. And not our opinions. Have you ever noticed that smart people can sometimes do stupid things. The list of explanations begins with pride, or arrogance. The apostle Paul uses the expression "puffs up." Literally, inflated. Like a needle has been inserted into one's head and a pump has inflated one's sense of importance, until the ego is larger than the brain. When this happens, people do really dumb things and often think dumb things. You know it's true.

We are a proud people! We think we won't get caught, that no one will notice, and that we're smarter than the law, our colleagues, our friends, or even God. In the Bible, think of smart people like Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, each of them made bad choices.

Ok, so food will not bring us closer to God. Being educated will not bring us closer to God. And being proud will not bring us closer to God, who "opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." If this is the case, what will bring us closer to God? Well, Paul says that although "knowledge puffs up ... love builds up." In other words, if we want to draw nearer to God, **Actionable Love** is the answer! And we demonstrate that kind of love by the things we do for others!

For Paul, this meant that although he had no problem eating food offered to Aphrodite in the temple overlooking Corinth, he would not eat such food in the presence of those whose conscience might thereby be weakened by his actions. The freedom he found in Christ was not a license or an excuse to do whatever he felt was acceptable to God, and the Apostle was careful to use his liberty in a way that built others up. For him, there was a nexus of liberty and love, and it is perhaps the most powerful linkage in human experience.

Paul's timeless concept is our take home for today! While all things might be lawful (as Paul might put it), our respect and love for each other may in some cases limit our freedom. His exact words are — found just two chapters later but on the same subject: “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.”

So, if you want the recipe for divinity, then you'll need ample quantities of the flour of selfless love, and more than a cup or two of the milk of human kindness, seasoned with mercy, forgiveness, gentleness, generosity and peacefulness. You might say that thinking about how our actions affect others is a recipe that warms the heart of God and that it brings us closer to God. It is simple, pure, and positively divine. And thanks be to God for that! Amen!