

# Knowledge is Important - But Not More Than Love

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For some reason, a big theme for me lately, as reflected in a couple of sermons last month, has been the issue of unity. It's hard to avoid it. For example, there's been the continued news of partisan dis-unity in our nation's capital. And if you've ever spent the time to read the letters to the editor in the *Tulsa World* newspaper, which I do every day, you get a sense just how un-united folks around here seem to be as well.

So using 1 Corinthians as a guide, we looked at how Paul addressed the issue of how important, and how hard it is to find unity of mind and purpose in the midst of diversity. **While I am a very strong proponent of celebrating the gifts that come with diversity, I am also always conscious of the ways our human nature constantly seems to try to use our differences to cause division and disruption.**

Today's Epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians 8 is another great example, albeit one that doesn't make a whole lot of sense in our day in age. I don't know about you, but I have never gotten into a heated debate over whether or not it's appropriate to eat meat that was first sacrificed to a pagan god.

What really seems to be at the heart of that particular dispute in that ancient Corinthian congregation has to do with pride. **What is pride?** Pride is actually one of those tricky words that carries both positive and negative connotations.

**From a positive perspective**, pride involves believing in your own sense of worth, or in the worth of an organization you strongly believe in. It carries a strong sense of self-esteem and dignity. That's why I said a few Sundays ago, quoting one of our denomination's former moderators, that I was "sinfully proud of being a Presbyterian."

There is that **other side of pride, however – the side that can indeed enter into the realm of sinfulness** when it leads to vanity, arrogance, egotism, conceit, and just a general sense of superiority over others. The great philosopher and theologian, St. Augustine, who lived during the time when the Roman Empire was crumbling back in the 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, once wrote that pride was "**the love of one's own excellence.**" In this sense, the opposite of pride is humility.

In a broad brushstroke sort of way, if Presbyterians tended toward one particular sin of pride, what would it be? What do we seem to be most proud

of? Or let me put it this way: **Is there an area where the love of our own excellence sometimes gets in the way of our efforts to find unity?**

I am not alone in the assessment that one particular sin of pride that Presbyterians, and especially progressive Presbyterians, tend to fall into is our **love of knowledge**. As a generally educated and intelligent group of folks, then, the words of the Apostle Paul in verse 1 of chapter 8 are not easy for many of us to hear and accept when he declares, “knowledge puffs up.”

You may have noticed on our worship bulletin cover that I included another version of this passage. It’s by noted pastor, scholar, writer, and poet Eugene H. Peterson. His unique rendering of the Bible is called *The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language*. While not a study Bible in any scholarly sense of the term, since it is more of a paraphrase than an actual translation from the ancient languages, I have found it helpful on many occasions. For instance, this is how Peterson renders the beginning of chapter 8:

*The question keeps coming up regarding meat that has been offered up to an idol: Should you attend meals where such meat is served, or not? We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions – but **sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds**. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.*

Again, though not a literal translation of the Greek, it certainly helps make the point that Paul was trying to make. And as with all of Paul’s letters to the churches he founded, we must be careful not to take his words out of the context in which they were written. So let’s look at that now.

In the pluralistic society and culture of ancient Corinth it was common for meat to be offered to a pagan god before it was sold in the marketplace. Today’s biblical text addresses this ancient dilemma of whether or not it is appropriate for Christians to eat such meat that had been offered to a Greek or Roman or some other deity.

Paul’s answer teaches us one of the most important lessons of how to live together in unity in the midst of our diversity. He answers not with a black and white, right or wrong, either/or kind of solution. Instead, he asks the Corinthians (and by extension us as well) to address any potentially problematic situation by first asking: **In this situation, what is the most appropriate thing to do?**

**An appropriate response, we learn, is to be based not always on our knowledge, even if correct, but rather on the guideline of whether or not it will build up the community or the other person.** That is what Paul means when he states, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Paul addresses the particular situation in Corinth the following way. Mature Christians, which he calls “strong” in the faith, have the knowledge to understand that there is one and only one God. Therefore, it *doesn’t matter* if Christians eat meat that pagans have offered up to non-existent gods.

Paul goes on to recognize, however, that there are many new converts to Christianity within their faith community. These new Christians (which Paul describes as “weak” in the faith) do not yet have the knowledge to understand that it is okay to eat such meat. So Paul instructs the “strong” Christians to not use their knowledge in a way that would hurt the fellowship and unity of their faith community. In other words, **the use of knowledge can be harmful if it fails to lovingly build up the community.**

Paul, who by no means could be considered an anti-intellectual (because I admit that I have very little patience with that), even warns that knowledge can lead to a sense of moral and spiritual superiority. In that regard, some things never change.

**In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we no longer argue about whether it's appropriate or not to eat meat offered to pagan gods. We argue over a lot of other things, however – many of which can be lumped into that broad category we call “culture wars”.** It's still possible, in fact, to find someone to have an argument over the moral merits of dancing, playing cards, or having a drink.

Yes, people of good faith often have very polarized views and opinions on a variety of societal and theological issues. But perhaps we, as Christians, and especially as Presbyterians, can apply Paul's standard of “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” to help us to live better together in unity in a way that builds true community.

**Ultimately, it is love and respect for those with whom we differ that keeps the various segments of the community from splintering into warring factions. By the same token, those that have splintered into warring factions have most often set aside love and respect for their opponents.**

Paul, therefore, cautions all Christians to not use our knowledge and liberty as a “stumbling block to the weak” (8:9). The biblical text, however, never hints that conflict itself is to be avoided. Paul's letters, in fact, consistently urge the church to jump right into the middle of the forum of moral and ethical and theological discussions.

Paul also urges that every member of the community be taken seriously, for **complete knowledge does not belong to any one segment of the church.** The Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall, president of Columbia (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary located outside of Atlanta, GA, reminds us that:

Good, intelligent, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ will interpret Scripture differently. Therefore, we must listen to one another, really listen, not in order to correct one another but in order to learn from one another.

Dialogue becomes our protection against self-righteousness. For without the ministry of our opponents, we can easily become proud and pretentious, cutting ourselves off from the work of grace by

judging our faith and practice to be so correct that we do not think we need grace.

Scripture calls us to hold our convictions, but always with humility. It is more important to be loving than to be right.

Perhaps you've heard the saying: What good does it do to win an argument only to lose a friend? **So when push comes to shove, love trumps knowledge.** So before you or I act or speak in exercising our own freedom, it is important that we ask ourselves first:

- Will what I am about to say or do help or hurt the building up of the community?
- How will my words and actions affect the life and growth of other people?

**Again, I believe that most of the things we say or do are not so much a matter of right or wrong, good or evil, but rather of what is appropriate or inappropriate under any given circumstance.**

Paul's basic message was that **knowledge without compassion is dangerous. For in the church, knowledge must coexist with love.** God calls us to welcome and accept those with differing points of view in ways that honor and reflect God's welcome and acceptance of each one of us.

**So yes, knowledge is important, but not more than love. And while I am a strong advocate that we should keep ourselves as informed as possible, and learn as much as we can, "sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds."** Knowing this should serve us, and this congregation well.

Amen.