

Love Trumps Knowledge

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” 1 Cor. 8:1

1 Corinthians 8:1-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The biblical passages assigned by the lectionary for this Sunday provide an interesting choice for a preacher, don't you think? I could base a sermon around the gospel reading from Mark that involves the story of an exorcism of an unclean spirit from a man who was part of the synagogue. It might be interesting to see if parallels could be drawn with this congregation. ☺

The other option is addressing the conflict that Paul deals with in the congregation in Corinth of whether one's religious freedom to eat meat offered to pagan idols causes spiritual distress and stumbling to those who don't share the same knowledge that it just doesn't matter.

After an initial impression that both biblical texts seem remarkably non-relevant to us in the 21st century, I flipped a coin [not really] and decided to focus on the latter. The reason was I was particularly drawn to the verse where Paul declares, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” (1 Cor. 8:1)

Even though it's a gross generalization and over-simplification, I am among those that believe that **if Presbyterians have one particular sin of pride, it may be our love of knowledge. And I think that those of us on the progressive end of the theological spectrum have an even bigger problem with that.** After all, many of us can point to learning the latest in scholarly biblical and historical study as a turning point that led us away from once-held conservative and traditional perspectives.

So, as a generally educated group of folks, the words of the Apostle Paul are not easy for many of us to hear and accept when he declares, “knowledge puffs up.” It's even harder to hear that we might have to reign in some of our behavior (non-sinful) from time to time. But 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 first.

Corinth, located in modern-day southern Greece, was a particularly problematic place. It consisted of widely diverse people from almost every nation in the ancient world, along with their widely diverse religious beliefs. That fledging Christian congregation in Corinth was itself made up not only of Jewish converts, but also those who came from what was termed as pagan religions, who worshiped a plethora of gods. **Learning to live together in unity amidst their diversity was something they really struggled with as a church.**

In that society and culture it was common for meat to be offered to the pagan gods 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 Greek and Roman and other deities.

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/white, right/wrong, either/or kind of solution.** Instead, he asks the Corinthians Christians (and by extension us as well) to address potentially problematic situations by asking: **"In this particular situation, what is the most appropriate thing to do?"**

Appropriate behavior, we learn, is to be based not always on our knowledge – even if we are 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) don't yet have the knowledge to understand that it is okay to eat such meat.

Paul, therefore, instructs the "strong" Christians not to use their knowledge in a way that would hurt the fellowship and unity of their faith community, especially if it would cause someone to stumble and fall. In other words, **the use of knowledge can be harmful if it fails to lovingly build up the community, the family of faith.** I invite you to think of modern-day parallels and examples.

Paul, who by no means could be considered an anti-intellectual, even warns that knowledge can lead to arrogance, even a sense of moral and spiritual superiority. Progressives often mistakenly tend to think that is the more conservative folks who tend to exhibit an air of spiritual superiority. But Paul reminds us that **it's the educated "in the know" folks that often have a bigger problem with this.**

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 order to build authentic community. One of our biggest dilemmas today, in fact, is **how can Presbyterians, with such polarized views on social and theological issues, exist together as a community of faith?**

In a new biblical commentary series entitled "Feasting on the Word," Ronald Allen reflects on the implications of this biblical passage from 1 Corinthians in our current religious context this way:

A congregation may find itself in a position in which the mission of the church is immobilized by one group's limiting its freedom for the sake of another. I think of issues such as attitudes toward biblical authority, supporting war, termination of pregnancy, and same-gender relationships. Tensions around such issues occur not only within congregations, but between congregations, denominations, and movements.

Groups sometimes believe that their integrity is at stake and that silence is complicity with evil. At such times, ministers can seek to bring dissonant voices into conversations (in sermons as well as in other settings).

I do not say this casually, but if no resolution is possible the groups in the congregation (or in different congregations or movements) may need to separate in distinct communities and trust that the God through whom all things exist (1 Cor. 8:6) can ultimately bring about eschatological resolution." [In other words, if not in this life, then maybe at the end of time.]

That indeed appears to be happening. As I mentioned just last Sunday, **there's a group of Presbyterians who believe that we have reached an impasse, and they can no longer exist beside Presbyterians that don't hold tightly and narrowly to the specific theological positions to which they subscribe.**

Meeting in Orlando, Florida, just over a week ago, a group of primarily conservative/evangelical Presbyterians, calling themselves **the Fellowship of Presbyterians**, proposed the formation of an entire new Reformed denomination in this country. The name chosen for this new denomination is the **Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians**. ECO for short.

In support of their position they have released documents laying out *their* understanding of theology and polity. At the moment, not a lot of congregations are expected to jettison the PC(USA) for this new denomination. One proposed option is to try to keep a foot in both denominations. How they expect that to work I have no idea. But just this past Friday an open letter signed by a many moderate Presbyterians, was sent out asking that these folks slow down and reevaluate the decision to leave our denomination.

Regardless, as Ronald Allen concludes in his commentary, **"Even so, all participants should treat one another with respect in both public and private settings."** I agree. For ultimately we are called to love and respect those with whom we differ. Hopefully, that would mean not splintering the Christian community.

The biblical text, however, never hints that conflict is to be avoided. Paul's letters, in fact, consistently urge the church to become the forum for 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**, or a congregation for that matter.

The Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall, former president of Columbia (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary 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.

She adds, **"Scripture calls us to hold our convictions, but always with humility. It is more important to be loving than to be right."** I have a similar on a sticky note attached to my computer up in my study that states, **"Never let a problem to be solved become more important than the person to be loved."** (Attributed to Barbara Johnson.)

As Christians, then, we must always consider how our words and actions affect other people. 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 of faith?
- How will my words and actions affect the life and spiritual growth of other people?

Paul's basic message was that **knowledge without compassion is dangerous. The lesson for the church is this: *knowledge must coexist with love.***

In fact, we can go as far as to state, **love trumps knowledge.** Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds."

Let us be careful not to turn our knowledge into a stumbling block for others.

Amen.