

Love Over 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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You know, just the other day I was having a heated debate with someone over whether or not it's appropriate to eat meat that was first sacrificed to a pagan god. Let's admit it, there are some issues brought up in the scriptures that really just have nothing to do with us today. Yet, there's something behind these ancient debates that does indeed have a lot to say to us today.

In today's Epistle Reading, Paul first letter to the Christian community of faith he founded in Corinth, Greece, he uses their specific questions to respond to a larger issue. In this case, it involves pride. In particular, the pride of knowledge. **What is pride?** According to Catholic moral thought, pride is considered one of the 'seven deadly sins,' thus making it one of the underlying causes of all sorts of other sins. Yet, pride is actually one of those tricky words in the English language that carries a positive connotation as well as a negative one.

From a positive perspective, pride in oneself involves understanding your own sense of worth, or caring about the quality with which you hope to accomplish something. Contrary to what many of us were taught, there's nothing inherently sinful about feeling deep pleasure or satisfaction from one's own achievements, or the achievements of an organization or individuals with whom you are closely associated, like family members. This form of pride carries a strong sense of self-esteem, respect and dignity. That's why I, to quote one of our denomination's former General Assembly moderators, Marg Carpenter, occasionally declare that I am “sinfully proud of being a Presbyterian.”

I say that again particularly on this day in response to our annual **Session Retreat** that was held just yesterday at Camp Loughridge. Our experience together in working to discern goals, and strategies to accomplish them, was a truly transformative moment in the life of our Session, and therefore in the life of this congregation. In fact, it was one of the highlights and greatest sources of encouragement I have experienced in the nearly 10 years I have served as your pastor. You will be hearing much more in the near future about **our efforts to discern God's vision for our community of faith, and how we hope to turn that vision into reality.**

There is another side of pride, however, the side that can indeed enter into the realm of sinfulness when it leads to vanity, arrogance, egotism, conceit, and 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 4th & 5th centuries CE, once wrote that pride was “the love of one's own excellence.” That's narcissism. So, in this sense **the opposite of pride is humility**, of being humble. That quality was certainly in full force at our Session Retreat as we worked together.

As a gross over-generalization, **if Presbyterians tend toward one particular sin of pride it tends to be our love of knowledge. That often leads, I'm afraid, to a disdain toward those we consider to be ignorant or willfully uninformed. Our thinking goes like this. Other people simply wouldn't believe the things they do if they just had the information and knowledge that we have. That's the all-too-common attitude that can and does often lead to a prideful sense of superiority, and yes, it affects progressives just as much or more so than conservatives.**

So, as a generally educated and intelligent group of folks, the words of the Apostle Paul in verse 1 of the 8th chapter of 1 Corinthians are not easy for many of us to hear and accept when he declares, "knowledge puffs up." Noted pastor, scholar, writer, and poet Eugene H. Peterson, in his unique rendering of the Bible, called **The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language**, paraphrases the beginning of chapter 8 this way:

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.

This is the point that Paul is trying to make. 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 Corinthian Christians, and by extension us as well, to address any potentially problematic situation by first asking: **In this particular 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 it's correct, but rather on the guideline of whether or not it will build up the other person, and/or the community of faith. That is what Paul means when he states, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." **The 'appropriate' thing to do, therefore, involves the heart as well as the mind.** Ultimately, then, it is love and respect for those with whom we differ that keeps the various segments of the community from splintering into warring factions. The flip side of that may also be true. If we have splintered into warring factions, then we have failed to love and respect those with whom we differ. It behooves us, therefore, to remember the old phrase: It is more important to be loving than to be right. It reminds me of another phrase that I try to live by: **Never let a problem to be solved become more important than the person to be loved.** (Attributed to Barbara Johnson.) For what good does it do, for instance, to win an argument only to lose a friend? Paul, therefore, cautions all Christians to not use our knowledge and our liberty – our freedom in Christ – as a "stumbling block to the weak" (8:9).

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 God-given 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 the other person?

Paul's basic message was that **knowledge without compassion is dangerous. The lesson for the church is this: knowledge must coexist with love.** Or again, 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 the pride of our knowledge into a stumbling block for others. Knowing and doing this should serve you and me, and this congregation, very well. By the way, did I mention how proud I am of the Ruling Elders of this congregation? Yes, for their knowledge, but even more so for the love they demonstrate for one another. And I can say the same for this entire congregation.

Amen.