

Knowledge is Good, Love is Better

“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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How many times have you gotten into a heated debate over whether or not it's appropriate to eat meat that was first sacrificed to a pagan god? Never? Me either. So why should we spend time on a passage of scripture that deals with an irrelevant, out-of-date issue? Because what really seems to be at the heart of that particular dispute, as found in the apostle Paul's first letter to that ancient Corinthian church, has to do with the over-riding issue of pride.

What is pride? According to Catholic moral thought, pride is considered one of the 'seven deadly sins,' making it one of the causes of all sorts of other sins. Yet, pride is actually one of those tricky words in the English language that carry a positive connotation, as well as a negative one.

From a positive perspective, pride 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 sinful about feeling deep pleasure or satisfaction from one's own achievements**, or the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated. This form of pride carries a strong sense of self-esteem, respect and dignity. That's why I, quoting one of our denomination's former moderators, Marg Carpenter, occasionally declare that I am “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 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**.” So in this sense, the opposite of pride is humility, being humble.

Therefore, here's the question I want to address this morning. In a broad brushstroke sort of way, **if Presbyterians tended toward one particular sin of pride, what do you think it would be?** In what area do we tend to love our own excellence? I am not alone in the assessment that one particular sin of pride that Presbyterians tend to be tempted by, and yes especially those of us who consider ourselves progressive Presbyterians, is 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. People simple 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 into a prideful sense of superiority.

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 is 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, I believe, is 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 Corinth in ancient Greece, it was common for meat to be offered to a pagan god before it was sold in the marketplace. Today's biblical text addresses the ancient dilemma of whether or not it is appropriate for Christians to eat such meat that had been offered to a Greek or Roman god, 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 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 community or the other person. 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. 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, especially if it leads others to do something that *they* think is sinful. 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, even warns that **knowledge can lead to a sense of moral and spiritual superiority.** In truth, I have to confess my sin of pride when it comes to having very little patience with willful anti-intellectualism, especially in our politicians. So take special note: **Progressives often mistakenly tend to think that it is the more conservative or evangelical folks who exhibit an air of moral and spiritual superiority. But Paul reminds us that it's the educated "in the know" folks that often have a bigger problem with this.**

In the 21st century, of course, 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 the "culture wars". Yes, people of good faith – on both sides of a moral argument – often have very polarized views and opinions on a variety of societal and theological issues. Ultimately, however, **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 any true sense of love and respect for their opponents.** We have experienced that within our own denomination, as well as within our political system itself. Paul, therefore, cautions all Christians to not use our knowledge and our liberty as a "stumbling block to the weak" (8:9).

The Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall, while 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.**

Remember that 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.) Or as I shared with the children of the church a few moments ago: **What good does it do to win an argument only to lose a friend?**

So when push comes to shove, **love trumps knowledge.** Therefore, Paul's basic message was that **knowledge without compassion is dangerous. 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.

Yes, knowledge is important and good, but not more so than love. And though I am still 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 you and me, and this congregation, well.

Amen.