

Knowledge: Yes / Love: Even More So

“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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I'm sure this has happened to you. You're having a heated debate with someone over whether or not it's appropriate to eat meat that was first sacrificed to a pagan god. Anyone?

Let's admit it, there are some issues brought up in the scriptures that really have little to nothing to do with us today. Yet, there's something *behind* these ancient debates that do indeed have a lot to say to us today. In our Epistle Reading, the **apostle Paul's** first letter to the Christian community of faith he founded in Corinth, Greece, he **uses their specific questions to address underlying larger issues**. In this case, behind the argument about what meat is appropriate to eat, the larger issue, though maybe not obvious at first, 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. Pride, however, 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 **inherent sense of worth**, knowing that God calls you, just as Jesus, the beloved. That's the “as yourself” part of “love your neighbor as yourself”. Pride can also mean caring about **the quality with which you hope to accomplish something**. Like, taking pride in one's work, hobbies, and giftedness. Contrary to what many of us were taught, there's nothing inherently sinful about feeling pleasure or deep satisfaction from one's own abilities and achievements. That also applies to the achievements of an organization or individuals with whom you are closely associated, like family members and each other. **This form of pride carries a strong sense of self-esteem, respect, and dignity**. To quote a common phrase used by one of our denomination's former General Assembly moderators, Marg Carpenter, “I am sinfully proud of being a Presbyterian.” And that is why I can say I'm sinfully proud of this community of faith, and our work, ministry, witness, and life together.

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 privilege and 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 is “the love of one's own excellence.” That's a form of narcissism**. So, in this sense **the opposite of pride is humility**, of being humble.

As a gross stereotypical over-generalization, if **Presbyterians** tend toward one particular sin of pride it tends to be **our love of knowledge**. This is what the apostle Paul refers to in his letter. This type of pride often leads to a disdain toward those we consider to be either ignorant or willfully uninformed. The thinking often 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 as conservatives.** Therefore, as a generally educated and intelligent group of folks, the words of the apostle 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 just 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.**

This 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.** Another way to think of this is to also **consider the pastoral response** in addition to or even instead of the informed response. It may even be better, at times, to keep our knowledge to ourselves.

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. The flip side of that may also be true. **If we have splintered into warring factions, as it appears we are doing as a nation, then we have failed to love and respect those with whom we differ.** Yes, this is a hard teaching. Perhaps it would be good to remind ourselves of the old phrase: It is more important to be loving than to be right. It reminds me of another phrase: **Never let a problem to be solved become more important than the person to be loved.** For what good does it do, as they say, to win an argument only to lose a friend?

Paul goes on to caution all Christians to not use our knowledge and our liberty – our freedom in Christ – as a "stumbling block to the weak" (8:9). **Paul refers to "the weak" as those who are new to the faith and are not yet fully informed. Therefore, they should not be led into something they consider to be wrong, even if we know it is not wrong. Otherwise, that makes us a stumbling block.**

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

I will confess, at this point, that I am guilty of not fully thinking through how I sometimes respond reactively in a less-than pastoral way. For those times, I apologize and ask for your forgiveness. **Extending grace to one another is a hallmark of a healthy community of faith.**

Paul's basic message is that **knowledge without compassion is dangerous**. The lesson for us and 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. Yet again, I am proud of how our community of faith, as knowledgeable as we may be individually and collectively, **make space for differing opinions, worldviews, and even theology and biblical interpretation** – notwithstanding, of course, whether or not one should eat meat sacrificed to a pagan god.

Amen.