

January 29th, 2012 4th Sunday After Epiphany 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

John Wesley was considered by some to be the most brilliant person of the 18th Century. He was certainly among the most brilliant in the church. He read eight languages, wrote some 440 books and pamphlets, and had an intellectual curiosity far beyond many of his peers. But not everyone was impressed. One woman wrote to him, "Mr. Wesley, I have been instructed by the Lord to tell you that He has no need of your learning." To which Mr. Wesley replied, "Madame, while I have no direct word from the Lord on this matter, I feel constrained to tell you that the Lord has no need of your ignorance either!"

Knowledge and faith always make strange companions. In our world today many would suggest that to be truly knowledgeable one must give up faith, for faith in God cannot be proven. Others would suggest that faith is the only route to true knowledge. Scientific methods and church doctrines have certainly often clashed. But, as Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, "There is nothing new under the sun."

In our second reading from 1 Corinthians we find the faith vs. knowledge argument in full swing. It appears as if some of the Corinthian Christians were quite proud of their knowledge base. They were among the stoics of the time. Many stoics in those days believed that knowledge: led to virtue, and that knowledge led to proper behavior, and that knowledge defines and enhances freedom. So the Corinthians linked knowledge and freedom - the more you know the freer you are.

Now Paul was a well-educated man himself, and he knew the power of knowledge. But he also knew that knowledge as an end unto itself was a dangerous and destructive thing. I'm sure you've all met highly intelligent and well educated people who are just puffed up with their knowledge. They are annoying and you just want to get away from them! And knowledge can certainly lead to arrogant carelessness. Look at the BP Oil Spill, nuclear disasters in Japan and Russia, space shuttle explosions, and on and on. It is easy to be a smart person and think that your smarts will get you through everything.

Paul wants to make it clear to the Corinthians that knowledge is not the be all and end all of things. He writes, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Paul wants the Corinthians to know that love, not knowledge, should be at the center of their actions and morals.

Don't get me wrong. Paul valued knowledge, and he'd agree that it can create wisdom, but he also knew it is capable of exploitation and abuse. Knowledge by itself is neither good nor bad. How it is applied is what matters.

Paul says a strange and interesting thing in verse 2, "Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge." Well, that's a 'Catch 22' if ever there was one! But I think you know what he's getting at. The person who knows everything has the most to learn. Benjamin Disraeli once said, "To be conscious that you are ignorant is a great step to knowledge."

Paul follows verse 2 with an equally strange and interesting thing in verse 3, "...but anyone who loves God is

known by him.” For us as Christians the definitive knowledge is not at all what we know. It is *who knows us* - God. You are known by God. God knows everything about you, even things you don't know about yourself. God knows your thoughts before you think them, and God even knows the little thoughts that run through you head like, “I shouldn't be thinking of things like that because God wouldn't approve.” Having the all powerful creator of the universe able to know us so intimately might be scary. Nothing is safe because our very thoughts and deepest motives betray us. But despite having full knowledge of your darkest corners God still willingly gave himself to have you. From beginning to middle to end it is all God's gracious love for you.

Paul wants the Corinthian Christians and us to know that our lives should reflect this love of God. Keep in mind the love that God has for you and the way it should be reflected in you as I read these thoughts from theologian J. Paul Sampley:

Love is not just a sentiment, nor just a feeling, not merely a sort of disposition. Love works; it acts; it does things; and the chief thing it does is to edify, build up, cause growth in each of the persons who engages in it and who is engaged by it.

Love is not a one-way street; it is more like the proverbial bad penny or like the widow's jar of meal and jug of oil (1Kings 17:8-16): You cannot get rid of it; it will not run out. Give it away profligately, prodigally, and it is never exhausted, nor is anyone shorted by the giving away; it does not have to be hoarded; it not only benefits the recipient, it rebounds (in a fuller form than it was sent) to the donor so that donor become recipient along with the other. Love works. Love transforms circumstances and people. The loved on is never again the same; the one who loves is never again the same. Love is thus a transaction but not a bartering; it is not susceptible to bargaining. Love, once under way, takes on a life of its own; like the grace on which it is built, it surprises. Love restores, love enlarges, and love makes whole."

We'll pick up on his thoughts again in a moment, but let's see how Paul applies this to the Corinthians. A big issue in early Christianity was whether you could eat meat or not. Unless you raised your own animals there was no way of knowing whether the meat you bought had been used in a pagan sacrifice. The pagan temples had a good thing going with sacrifices. They believed that the gods liked the smell of burnt offerings. And so it was like a barbeque. They'd kill the animals, cook the

meat and the smoke and the smell would rise to the heavens for the gods to enjoy. The gods of course didn't care about the meat itself. And so the people ate the meat or sold it.

Some Christians were upset that the meat they ate may have been used in some pagan sacrifice. They wouldn't eat it. Other Christians said these weren't real gods and it didn't really matter. Paul agrees that it doesn't really matter, but for the sake of those who are offended by the idea, you shouldn't indulge. It could unnecessarily hurt their faith. Loving them meant refraining from that which might offend them.

Perhaps a more recent example comes from music styles in church. When I was growing up I was subtly taught that God approved of classical music and classical music only. God did not like jazz, blues, ragtime, and certainly not rock music. Of course it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that the style of music be effective in conveying the grace of God; especially to those who do not know the grace of God. That is the more loving faith perspective to have.

Now before I leave all this with love sounding like an incredible burden, remember J. Paul Sampley's words, "[Love] not only benefits the recipient, it rebounds (in a fuller form than it was sent) to the donor so that donor becomes recipient along with the other." When love is working properly both the giver and the receiver are built up. That is the way it should work. But we are foolish to think it always does. Sampley goes on, "But love is not a magic wand; love can be spurned and rejected; and sometimes love elicits its nearest of kin, hatred."

I can't preach to you in all faithfulness that if you go out and selflessly love as Paul writes about that it will rebound on you in greater form all the time; most of the time, yes; but not always. Sometimes love is not received. And when it is not, that is not an excuse for you to begin hating. No, you go on loving. But your love will take on a different form. Call it tough love if you'd like.

You go on loving because God loves you. It is not what you know that matters. It is *who knows you* that really counts.

Amen