

“Knowledge Puffs Up but Love Builds Up”

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

A priest, a pastor, and a rabbi walk into Max & Ermas to share a drink and talk shop. One of them makes the comment that preparing a sermon and preaching isn't really all that hard. After a few rounds, one thing leads to another and they decide to do a competition. They all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and do whatever they can to convert it.

The next day, back at Max & Ermas and fresh from Southwest Hospital, they share their stories. Father Flannery is bandaged head to toe and on crutches. He reports, “When I found my bear, I read to him from the catechism. Well, that bear just started slapping me around. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him, and Blessed Holy Mother, he became as gentle as a lamb. The bishop is going out next week to give him first communion and confirmation.

Reverend Billy spoke next from his wheelchair, an arm and both legs in casts. In his best fire and brimstone oratory he claimed, “Well brothers, you know we don't sprinkle anything. But I found me a barr and read to him from God's Holy Word! But that barr wanted nothin to do with me. So I took hold of him and we began to wrassle. We wrassled up one hill and down another until we can to a crick. So I quick dunked him and baptized his hairy soul! And just like you said, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praisin Jesus and I signed him up for new members class.

They both looked down at Rabbi Goldstein who was in pretty bad shape – an

IV drip, full body cast, having been wheeled in on a hospital bed. The rabbi sighed in pain and reflected, “Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start.”

This story gets us to laugh at the tension that’s always been there between people of faith. Who has the most knowledge? Who has been preaching and converting in the right way? Which is more effective – sprinkling, dunking, or circumcision? How are we to live out our faith?

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, our lesson this weekend, Paul addresses members of the church who continue to attend pagan temple services and eat the meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Others in the church who are not doing this are greatly troubled by those who are. We have early church conflict. To add fuel to the conflict, those who are eating the meat claimed to have a special “knowledge” the others didn’t have. This assertion provides Paul the opportunity to pounce in verses 1 -2 . . . Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.^[2] Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge;

The Greek word translated as “puffs up” is the image of an object puffed up with wind, which might appear grand but has no real substance. The image reminds me of the parachute that was all folded up and laying in a small space at the back of the boat we were on last month off of Daytona Beach. When Danette,

Rachel, and Rachel's fiancé, Andy, were putting on their harnesses, I wondered how such a small piece of cloth was going to hold the three of them in the air at 2,000 feet over the Atlantic. But when Ariel let the parachute out and the wind instantly puffed it up, I knew it was grand enough to even lift the 3 of them off the deck of the boat. That's the image when Paul writes that knowledge "puffs us up" but love "builds us up."

The knowledge – puffs-up issue was a huge problem in Corinth as it has been in every church community since then. These very gifted and knowledgeable Christians knew it all, some even believed they could go to the woods and convert a bear, and they didn't hesitate to let their Christian brothers and sisters who were struggling with some moral and ethical issues, know that they knew it all. They were puffed up like a parachute or puffed up like a priest, pastor, or rabbi after a couple of drinks, snobby, stuffy, and smug Christians.

A few years back my two sons who were fans of the T.V. series "South Park," insisted I watch an episode with them because they thought I just might like it. The Corinthian Christians and many other Christians remind me of that episode entitled "Smug Alert" during which we saw what happens when people who love hybrid cars are so concerned about other people knowing they are part of the green movement that they insist on buying hybrids even though they are ugly. Gerald buys one and moves his family out of South Park after finding he just can't live with non-hybrid people. They end up in San Francisco, surprise, where he and his

family find a lot of other smug people, and as the association grows, the smugness grows to such an extent that soon there is a smug problem which leads inevitably to periodic “smug alerts.”

To live and breathe as a Christian in a community of faith means to be open to “smug alerts” to keep us spiritually healthy. Paul is issuing a “smug alert” to the Corinthians. “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.”

In verses 2 and 3, Paul reiterates this point with an intriguingly unbalanced comparison between love and knowledge. “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.”

Knowledge comes out on the losing end. Paul believes full knowledge is not possible because even people who think they know it all, don’t have “the necessary knowledge.” This is affirmed 5 chapters later in 1 Corinthians 13 when Paul confesses that even he only knows in part. In verses 12 and 13, Paul writes: “¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

In both chapters 8 and 13, Paul connects our loving our God means we will be known by him. The person who loves God is the recipient of God’s love. The benefit of loving God is being known by Him.

Then in verses 4-13, Paul leaves this theoretical discussion of love to return

his attention to the statements made by the Corinthians about the issue of meat.

In verses 4-6, Paul tells them the idols of gods are just powerless pieces of stone. So if temple sold meat has been sacrificed to an idol, it is meaningless to them, because they no longer believe in idols. But not all new Christians understand this, so in order to be a good example for them, don't eat the temple sold meat, so you do not trouble those who see it as unfaithful. What's important to Paul is not the eating of meat but how people relate to one another in the family of faith. So Paul ends chapter 8 with these words in verses 12 and 13 . . .¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

That's what's most important to Paul. Don't put personal freedoms before family harmony. If the personal freedom to eat temple sold meat is causing disharmony and conflict in the family, then Paul says, "I will never eat meat." Paul believes that knowledge puffs up but love builds up. Paul values a demonstration of love over a demonstration of knowledge and the insistence on personal freedoms. The family takes priority over the individual.

Sadly, there are still many of us who put the church family last and our own individual needs first. I finish with a true story from a few months back.

The makers of Butterball - brand turkeys operate something they call the "Butterball Turkey Talk Line." It's an 800 number you can call, to get tips on how

to cook your Thanksgiving turkey. They get some pretty strange calls, but none so strange as the woman who called up, wanting to know if it was safe to defrost and cook a Butterball turkey she'd had in her freezer for 26 years. The answer came back that, providing the turkey had been properly wrapped and continuously frozen at a low enough temperature it was technically safe to eat – but that its quality would not be good.

“That’s what we thought,” the call replied. “We’ll give it to the church.”

What would St. Paul say to that woman about eating meat and putting the needs of the community of faith first? “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.”

May the peace of God . . .

#631 - Love Divine, All Loves Excelling