

Knowledge Puffs Up,
But Love Builds Up
(1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Sometimes people will share with you an experience that is so remarkable that it sticks with you, in your memory. I remember an experience that one conference speaker shared with those of us who had gathered. I don't remember who he was, or what he looked like, or anything else that he said that night. But I remember him telling how he and his family had moved to a new community. They started attending a new rather large church. It was right before Easter that they began attending. Their high school aged daughter began attending the youth group. In this church, the young people all got up on Easter Sunday morning and went out to worship God in a sunrise service held outside. Well, his daughter got all dressed up, high heeled shoes, best dress. What she did not realize was that the service was held on top of a mountain nearby. Everyone else had on their hiking boots and blue jeans and warm coats, and here she was, walking up this muddy trail in her best Sunday dress. The kids in the group didn't miss a beat. There was no making fun. They loaned her a coat to put on and helped her up the steep trails, and even though she was dressed differently than everyone else, they made her feel like she was and had always been one of them. It was a tremendously affirming experience. In that congregation this girl experienced a group of people whose purpose and desire was to build one another up in love, so that together all could experience God's presence, share God's love and reach out to others. Their purpose was to build one another up, in love.

This is the way God intends his church to be. But churches do not always behave like this. In the church in Corinth, Paul saw something else going on. People there were not building one another up in love. There was another dynamic going on. It was a dynamic of pride and competition. Paul had to write them and say, "Knowledge puffs up, but loves builds up."

Knowledge puffs up. What a hard idea for those of us who live in the information age to understand let alone accept! We have been taught from the time we were little to value education. The fact is, if we want to help others as doctor, dentist or pilot, first we have to learn lots and lots of stuff, and in the learning we have to by practice and repetition learn solid, reliable skills. Only then can we be equipped to help others. Paul may say that knowledge puffs up, but we know that knowledge empowers. Dig a little deeper, though, and we can see that sometimes knowledge does go to peoples heads. It does puff them up. Even in our world knowledge can be as much about pride and competition as it is about helping others. For some the skills and the knowledge are just a means to status and position and the wealth and all of the benefits they bring. Even in the church. Even here people can use knowledge to build themselves up at the expense of others. Education, and Christian education, in particular, should be an experience of excitement, new learning and joy. For many, however, education is a process that lowers their self-esteem. In the process of learning they become painfully aware of their lack of knowledge; they come away with no joy of discovery, no sense of adventure, no appreciation for the experience. The teaching experience makes them ashamed of themselves, aware of their failings and conscious of their limitations. (The Pastor as Spiritual Guide, Howard Rice, p. 108). Even Bible Study can degenerate into

a competitive activity. When this happens, the process of teaching negates what is taught. Christian education becomes trivial pursuit. Who knows the answers to the most questions. Knowledge can puff up.

What is true in our day was doubly true in the church at Corinth. In this congregation people were continually comparing themselves to one another. They were acutely aware of status, and pride motivated what they did and said. Maybe it was the culture they lived in. Knowledge in that culture and day was often more about access to an inner circle than about building the skills needed to reach out to others. Religious cults abounded in which people believed that the world was evil and God was good. All material things were evil, and spiritual things alone were good. So how did you climb that spiritual ladder to God? You did it by knowing secret knowledge. Those who knew the right doctrines and teachings were pure, no matter what they did with their lives and bodies. It all had to do with the possession of the knowledge of these secret rituals and doctrines. Christians in Corinth didn't believe this, but when you read Paul's letter, you get the feeling that they were still infected with this kind of elitist attitude. They still somehow felt that those who had the right knowledge were superior to those who didn't. The Holy Spirit had given them different gifts. The idea was that they use those gifts to love one another, to build one another up, and to accomplish the mission of the church. Instead they began comparing gifts, priding themselves that their gifts were better. The ones whose gifts were visible and exciting counted themselves above the common workers who worked in the background. Paul had to scold them for that. And now there are some who think they have theology all figured out. And their pride is hurting other people in the church.

This was the situation in Corinth. If you want meat in Corinth, in Paul's day, you don't go down and buy it at Kroger, or Jerry's market. It doesn't come from USDA regulated meat packing houses in Chicago. Meat in those days was butchered in the temples. And the temples in Corinth were pagan temples. People sacrificed cows and sheep to pagan Gods, like Diana, or Zeus, or Aphrodite. Only the best, fattest, cleanest animals, without blemish, that were sacrificed. Part of the animals were burned on the altar. The pagan priests ate some. The rest of the animal was cut up and sold in the open market alongside stands of vegetables or cloth. When you went down to get your steak for dinner, you could never be sure whether it had just been part of a worship service to a pagan god. The question is, "Is it okay to eat this meat if it has been used in a pagan worship service?" If you eat this meat, aren't you participating in the worship of an idol? Isn't that meat defiled? And if you eat it, don't you become defiled, too? Now the sophisticated Christians in Corinth knew the answer to that question. How could anyone not understand it? Anyone who knew any theology at all understood that there is really only one true God. All those other gods that people worship are fictions. They don't exist anywhere but in the minds and hearts of the worshippers. Meat offered to them is no different than any meat. So what harm could there be in eating it? Now these new Christians start coming to church, and they are not so sure it is okay after all. The more sophisticated of God's children didn't like it when some Johnny-come lately Christians tried to encroach on their freedom. Eating meat like this was no big deal.

For those new to the Christian faith, eating meat that had been offered to idols was a big deal. Before they had become Christians many of them had worshipped these idols. They believed them to be real and have power. They had thrown turned

away from that old life to embrace the one true God, but they still believed pagan gods to be real. Here are these older, more sophisticated Christians making fun of their scruples. Some of the new Christians may have wanted to be part of that sophisticated, in-crowd. Their argument made sense. So they put aside their scruples, fire up their grills and chow down. They have done nothing wrong. God doesn't think they have sinned by going against their conscience in this matter. But there is a problem. Their hearts haven't caught up with their minds and try as they might, they end up feeling, even believing that they have betrayed themselves and God, and now they must live with shame and guilt. Some may become so disillusioned and disoriented that they fall back into all their old habits. Their new life in Christ goes out the window and their faith is destroyed. "Wake up!" Paul writes. It is love that builds people up. It is sensitivity to where others are coming from and what they are struggling with in their lives. Love that cares more about how the way that I act might hurt someone else than about my right and freedom to act.

Theological pride is as destructive today as it was in Corinth. Sometimes Christians who know that Christ has set them free in an incredible way look down their noses on those who live by hard and fast rules—who focus on not drinking, not smoking, not dancing, who see the world in terms of black and white. "They just want to live in a world where someone tells them what to believe."

Tex Sample interviewed pastors who were successful in building congregations in them midst of hard living people, people who had been on drugs, or who were coming out of lives of dependency, or abuse, or prostitution. Often these congregations were communities where new Christians lived by hard and fast rules. No drinking – at all. No smoking – at all. You give ten percent to the church, period. New Christians learned strict rules about handling money and debt. Sophisticated Christians might look down their noses at it all, and yet God's Spirit, working in those boundaries, gave people back their lives. Lives free from alcohol and drug abuse. Lives free from bondage to debt. Lives in which they were not always dependent and learned to make what they have stretch to cover the bases. The were good, new, redeemed lives. What right, then have other Christians got, to look down their noses. Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.

Theologically liberal Christians do not have a corner on the market when it comes to theological pride. This attitude works its harm in communities of strict and rigid faith, too. I remember a conversation I had with a Missionary Church pastor in another town. In his church much tension that existed between the patriarchs of the church and young people—between established church folks and new comers. Patriarchs did not want any of the rules relaxed. Folks who smoked could not be officers. It and many other things were wrong, and that was that. "I am always encouraged," he said, "when I see cigarette butts in cans and receptacles, because those younger working people are being attracted by the gospel and are bringing into the church new energy and life. It shows me that the gospel is attracting and making a difference in the lives of people in this town often are overlooked by the church." Paul once had to scold the Apostle Peter because he didn't want to sit down and eat with Gentile Christians. Somehow they were not theologically pure enough. What would his friends think. They were too theologically loosey goosey. For a long time the friends did not want to allow any gentiles to become Christians unless they became Jews first.

Then the church had a meeting and settled the issue. They could be part of the church even without being circumcised. Had it not been for the Spirit working his life and the early church the door of grace would have been closed to many people. And now, Peter, spotted by his more conservative friends gets cold feet and withdraws from those who are, theologically, not quite strict and good enough. Knowledge puffs up. It is love that builds up.

What was going on in Corinth, what happened with Peter, what happens still today is not just a dynamic of pride and competition, it is a dynamic of exclusion. It shuts the door of God's redeeming grace to people who stand in a different place in their lives. This, says Paul, is not what the church is about. It is not about people making the grade, but about people knowing God's love in Christ and building each other up in that love.

Wherever the fruits of the Spirit are present—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self control. Wherever they are present people grow in their faith. When love takes priority people find joy in learning, in the gaining new knowledge, in learning new skills, in finding their own gifts and seeing those gifts used and seeing those gifts mature. In communities of faith like this, love truly does build up. It does not seek to change the oddball, the one who comes unprepared, or differently dressed in Sunday dress and high heeled shoes, but welcomes her in as if she had been part of the group all their lives. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up and sets us free from fear, free from sin, free from guilt, free to love others, free to worship God, free to serve.