

“Knowledge Isn’t Enough”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
February 1, 2009*

I Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28

Our first passage is from I Corinthians, chapter 8. The Apostle Paul is writing to a congregation he helped establish in the ancient port city of Corinth, which was at the time a real melting pot of cultures and ideas. Paul had spent a year and a half in Corinth, teaching them about the good news of God’s love embodied in human flesh, and instructing them how to live their lives in response to this truth, but now the congregation had fallen into serious conflict. Eugene Peterson describes the situation in one succinct sentence:

“Factions had developed, morals were in disrepair, worship had degenerated into a selfish grabbing for the supernatural.”ⁱ

The particular problem the eighth chapter addresses is a conflict about whether or not it was permissible for people in the community of faith to purchase and eat meat that had been sacrificed to any one of the various deities that other people in that cosmopolitan city worshipped. Some people in the community argued that buying and eating such meat should be no problem, because, after all, they knew that there was only one God. Therefore, they reasoned, meat from an animal sacrificed to a pretend or non-existent deity should never be off limits. Others in the church were horrified at the thought that any follower of Jesus would put something like that into their mouths. Listen for how Paul addresses the conflict, encouraging the ones who think they are “in the know” to consider how their actions might affect others. And when, at the end of the passage he writes, “Therefore, if food is the cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall,” bear in mind that he is engaging in a bit of hyperbole there. Listen now to hear how God might be addressing you and me in this passage. *Read I Corinthians here.*

Our second lesson comes from the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus has inaugurated his public ministry, he’s called Peter, Andrew, James and John, and now he stops in at the synagogue in Capernaum, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, to do a little teaching. Listen for what happens next. *Read Mark here.*

There is an old adage in the world of business and politics that speaks to the importance of being connected. Raise your hand if you’ve heard it. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” There’s some truth to that saying, of course. Ask any salesperson and they can tell you about the importance of having a network of contacts in order to make a deal happen. Ask a legislator or lobbyist about the importance of knowing people in order to get a bill passed. Ask any number of the people who will be watching the Super Bowl tonight from a seat in Raymond James Stadium instead of from a living room couch. You might hear them say it. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

Ask the Apostle Paul, writing to a squabbling group of believers in an early church. I think he might just say the same thing. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” And he wouldn’t just be

talking “churchspeak” about “knowing Jesus,” in the sense of having some sort of personal relationship with God - as crucial as that is to our spiritual health and wellbeing. He would be talking about the importance of being connected to one’s fellow human beings, within and beyond the confines of the church. The Rev. James Forbes, pastor emeritus of Riverside Church in New York City, speaking of just that sort of connection, once put it this way, “Nobody gets into the Kingdom of Heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”ⁱⁱ It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.

There’s a sense in which knowledge *of things* is value-neutral. Now that’s not to say it isn’t useful to know things. Our public and private education system is predicated on the value of knowing information. From kindergarten on, we pour facts and information into the brains of children and youth, hoping that they will learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, something of the history of our nation and the world, something about how science understands the natural order and the human body, and so forth. We encourage our children to learn these facts, in part, so they can make good grades. We send them to SAT prep courses like the ones some of our youth went to this weekend so they will do well on the standardized tests that can help get them into college. One of the reasons we work with the Dreamers is so that they too learn things so that they have opportunities for higher education.

It is good to know things. I laughed last night listening to Garrison Keillor, on *A Prairie Home Companion*, weave a tale of a highly educated man who had a “save the chickadees” bumper sticker on the back of his hybrid car, who nonetheless didn’t know how to use jumper cables. There is some usefulness in knowing things, from the basics of sentence structure to the date of the Battle of Hastings to how to change a tire or charge a car battery. But it is how you and I **use what we have come to know** to love and serve God, others, and the world that ultimately gives knowledge value. It’s not what we know, it’s **how we use what we know to build up who we know**.

That is what the Apostle Paul was trying to get across to those bickering believers in Corinth. To people who knew that there was nothing wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols, and therefore did so without regard to how it might affect others in the community, Paul said, “Pay attention to the ways in which what you do impacts your brother and sister.” Incidentally, this is why many Presbyterian churches only serve grape juice at communion, because they don’t want to put a temptation or stumbling block in front of people who might be alcoholics.

This is also why many churches are careful about being associated in any way with gambling, and why denominations come out with statements against the lottery. I remember the very first presbytery meeting I ever attended, when I was a candidate under care of Grace Presbytery in Dallas. The pastors and elder commissioners were getting ready to vote on a resolution taking a stand against a bill in front of the Texas Legislature at the time - a bill instituting a lottery. Right before the vote, one of my pastor friends turned to another and said, “What are the odds that this passes?”

Churches are careful about being associated with gambling, not because it is somehow inherently evil in and of itself; not because it is fundamentally wrong, necessarily; not because it is decried in the Bible; but because they are aware that people of any social class can get sucked into gambling to such an extent that they lose everything. It is not life-giving, it is life-destroying.

Paul was calling the community in Corinth to something more than knowledge. In fact, he was saying that sometimes knowledge itself can become a problem - especially when it leads to destructive conflict and division. You can see it in presbytery meetings. People come in just knowing that their position on a particular issue is right. They are convinced that those who disagree with them are misguided, somehow in the clutches of evil forces (whether those forces are on the right or the left). You can hear it in the political arena and on talk radio, as people on the right and the left demonize their political opponents. You can experience it in the way people in certain churches talk about people in other churches. Looking down their noses at others who read the Bible too literally, or not literally enough... Scorning those who have reduced the gospel to a formula or those who seem to have watered it down to nothing more than a “squishy” sort of love... In the process what is often lost is a sense of the other person doing his or her best to respond to what they have come to know of the divine.

When Paul says, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” I can’t help but think of the puffer fish and the porcupine who, when under threat, puff themselves up so that they seem somehow more threatening, jutting out spiny quills to try to keep the other from coming too near. It is a defensive move.

I think of the sorts of conversations I’ve heard and sometimes been a part of in which someone else has been demonized. When that happens, we lose a sense of the other as someone to whom we are meant to be connected. One of the reasons our new President appealed to so many people during his campaign was because his most soaring rhetoric spoke of our connection, the common humanity we share with those who are different from us, whether red or blue, American or foreigner, rich or poor. There is something more than knowledge at work in that rhetoric. There is wisdom at work there.

I think what Paul was calling the Corinthians to was wisdom - God’s wisdom. There are many ways to define wisdom and how it differs from knowledge. The Oxford English Dictionary calls it “the capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Jimi Hendrix, that master theologian, said that, “Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens.”^v A friend of mine says that wisdom is knowledge controlled by love. It is good to know things. But it is more important to know and love people.

We started our confirmation process back in January. One of the things we try to do with confirmation is to pour a lot of information, a lot of knowledge, into our young peoples’ heads. We teach them about worship, we teach them ways to read and interpret the Bible, we teach them about what Presbyterians have typically believed. We teach them about Presbyterian polity, the way we govern ourselves. We teach them about spiritual gifts, and spiritual disciplines. We encourage them to write their own statement of faith in response to what they have learned. We pour all kinds of information into their heads, including ways in which they can go out and serve others.

We don’t do that in order to make our eighth-graders into lockstep Presbyterians, Calvin Youth who are schooled in the doctrines of God’s glory, predestination, election, and the total depravity of human beings. We do that to try to give them knowledge. We do that to teach them something of our Christian and Presbyterian tradition. We do that to give them something with which to interact. We do that to give them something to think about, to react to, even to rebel against.

But more important than the knowledge we try to give them, the information we try to pour into their heads (not all of which makes it in!), are the opportunities we try to provide for them to learn some wisdom. They learn it through speaking to the ladies at the Fulton House who have come to see the power of God at work in their lives in delivering them from addictions. They learn it from talking to their mentors about what is important in their own faith and what they themselves struggle to believe, and where they experience themselves growing spiritually. It is our hope that they acquire some wisdom in addition to all the knowledge.

I have a favorite story that my colleague Tom Long tells, a story that speaks to wisdom.

The great actress Dorothy Maguire was appearing on Broadway in Tennessee Williams' play The Night of the Iguana. Just before curtain time on a Friday night, the theater was disturbed by the shrill voice of a woman in the audience shouting, "Start the show! Start the show! I want to see Dorothy Maguire!" The woman was clearly emotionally disturbed, but after a moment of shocked silence, some in the theater began to turn on her. "Listen, you old bag, get out!" someone heckled. "Throw her out! Start the show!" another jeered. The house manager came to try and reason with the woman, but she pulled away, shrieking, "All I want to see is Dorothy Maguire; then I'll leave."

Suddenly, through the part in the curtains, Miss Maguire herself appeared. She crossed the stage and walked calmly over to the disturbed woman. She spoke quietly to her and then hugged her. The woman, who had recoiled whenever anyone else had touched her, drew close to Miss Maguire, got up from her seat, and together they walked toward the exit. Before they left the theater, Miss Maguire paused and turned to the audience. With grace and kindness, she announced, "I'd like to introduce another fellow human being."

There is something more than knowledge in that. There is something more than conventional wisdom. There is something of God's wisdom at work in a famous actress pointing to a mentally ill woman and saying, "Let me introduce to you a fellow human being."

You can have all the knowledge in the world, but it takes wisdom to say something like that. A wisdom that looks at the world and people in light of vulnerable love, the vulnerable love of God, made flesh in Jesus and made flesh in you and me.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

ⁱ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2002), p. 2064.

ⁱⁱ In the oral version of the sermon, I erroneously attributed this quote to Tony Campolo, that irascible and dynamic Baptist preacher and sociologist. I am quite sure I've heard him say something very similar, but he could well have been quoting Forbes. I have not been able to find when and where Forbes said first these words, but he has apparently said them often and they are widely attributed to him.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the Oxford English Dictionary.

^{iv} I found the quote attributed to Jimi Hendrix on Wikipedia and a variety of other sites. But there is no mention of whether the words are found in the lyrics to a song, or whether he spoke them in an interview.

^v Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 64.