

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Love Builds Up”

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1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

8 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; ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.

4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists’, and that ‘there is no God but one.’ ⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ ‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹² But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

In my half century plus years of life, I have come to develop some strong opinions about certain things. These opinions have been developed from my upbringing, my environment, and my years of experience. Even though my opinions may not contain much wisdom, and probably aren’t even based on facts, I understand that they control my behavior. For this I apologize! So that you might better understand me, this morning I will share with you some things that I believe to be right, at least from my perspective. I really hope that I do not offend too many of you!

1. I believe that left-handed people are naturally superior.
2. I believe that young women are the most dangerous drivers on the road today.
3. I believe that chocolate on pretzels is a horrible waste of chocolate and that peanut butter on anything is a horrible waste of the anything.
4. I believe that the book is always better than the movie.
5. I believe that Neil Diamond and Barbra Streisand should not be allowed to sing Christmas carols.

6. I believe that people should write only in black ink.
7. I believe that with the exception of pecan, pie should always contain fruit and certainly never be pumpkin.
8. I believe that coffee is one of the best smells in the world but one of the worst tastes.
9. I believe that one should never cheer for the New York Yankees, Dallas Cowboys, or Ohio State Buckeyes.
10. I believe that cell phones should be banned from automobiles, baseball games and waiting rooms.
11. I believe that if you arrive on time for an appointment or an activity, you are already late.
12. I believe that reality television isn't really real.
13. I believe that Letterman is superior to Leno.
14. I believe that Hershey's Hugs are better than Hershey's Kisses.
15. I believe that the Kardashians, all of the Real Housewives, and the entire cast of The Jersey Shore should be exiled to Afghanistan.

I am grateful for the patience and wisdom of my wife Laura. She has a way of gently reminding me when I begin to take my beliefs way too seriously. As much as I like to be right, Laura teaches me that it is always more important to be loving than it is to be right. It is then when I recognize that there is a danger of idolizing my own perspective at the expense of trying to understand the views of another.

That seems to be a foible of much of humanity. Perhaps we notice it most in our nation's capitol, at least in the debates of opposing parties in Congress. Politicians form iron-clad beliefs on certain issues that makes compromise become impossible. This week I was moved to see Representative Gabrielle Giffords, victim of a would-be assassin's bullet, bravely walk up the steps to the Speaker's platform and deliver her resignation letter. I was encouraged to hear that in her letter, she warned her now former colleagues of the risk of clinging to the correctness of one's ideology at the loss of listening to and appreciating the opinions of others.

We experience the frustration of self-righteous beliefs in relationships with spouses and siblings and in-laws. We deal with it in our closest friends. We are aware of it in our boss and in our co-workers. And on this day, the day of our annual meeting at Meadowbrook Congregational Church, we must acknowledge that it something rears its ugly head even in the church. At some point in time we come to the belief that we are right. We enjoy being right. We wish everyone would agree that we are right. But it doesn't always work out that way.

The Scripture lesson this morning is one of those strange pieces of the Bible that makes us wonder. Is this a discussion of food, animal sacrifice, or proper behavior in church? In this passage, the apostle Paul is responding to a situation that has developed in the early Christian church at Corinth. Back in those days, a traditional rite of most faiths involved the sacrifice of animals and other foods to the gods and goddesses. The sacrificed food was later eaten, possibly by the priests, or sold in the market to help pay the expenses of running the temple. In the Corinth church there were some that believed food sacrificed to an idol was defiled and not

fit to be eaten. These people frowned upon the dining behavior of their fellow Christians who chose to eat of such unclean fare.

Paul writes that there is no reason not to eat such food. After all, food sacrificed to an idol is really food being sacrificed for nothing. God has not required it. It isn't sacred. Nothing magical has happened. It is still just food. But Paul stresses that just because he understands this well it does not mean that everyone else understands it as well. There will still be people who in some way are confused and believe that the consumption of such food will defile their faith.

Paul warns the enlightened ones, the ones who would eat such food freely, "to take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block for the weak." In other words, just because you know the truth doesn't excuse you for acting without kindness and consideration toward those who may not know as much as you do. Determining how you act in a given situation is not always a matter of what is right and what is wrong. It is also a matter of how your actions will enhance and uplift the life and well being of other people.

There is a story about a Zen Buddhist monk who was traveling along a quiet road. In the middle of the path he found a basket containing a baby, apparently abandoned by its mother. The monk picked the baby up, held it lovingly, then suddenly began to weep and laid the baby back in its basket. As the story goes, the monk continued on his journey, leaving the baby behind in the middle of the road. He left it there because he respected the parent-child relationship and he knew for a fact that nothing could replace the child's mother. His beliefs about the bond between a mother and a baby prevented him from doing what was necessary and what was ultimately right.

When we disagree in church, it is not because some of us are stupid and some of us smart. It is not because some are good and others evil. It is not because some of us have been here awhile while others are fairly new to the congregation. It is our life experiences that cause us to interpret things differently, to be moved by the Spirit in diverse ways, and to prefer numerous styles of worship, of music, of organization, of outreach, of ministry priorities. Yet Christ has called us to live together as the church. In the church there are limitations imposed by love upon our preferences. In the church it is more important to be loving than to be right.

Paul writes, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Our pride can divide us from one another. Our knowledge can make us smug and judgmental. Our opinions can blind us to the gifts of grace that come in the words and deeds of others. Our comfort in familiar things can prevent us and others in experiencing God in new ways and hearing God's truth that is yet to come. Paul writes that we are to live righteously, but living righteously means that we are to bless others through our righteous living. Knowledge puffs up, but reaching forth to serve others out of love can only build up.

There were once some missionaries in the Philippines who set up a game of croquet in the front yard of their living quarters. Several of the local Agta Negrito people were most interested in the game and wanted to join in the fun. The missionaries explained the game and instructed each to take a mallet and a ball. As the game progressed, the opportunity came for one of the players to take advantage of another by knocking the other person's ball out of the court. One of the missionaries explained how this was to be done but this instruction only puzzled the local man. "Why would I want to knock his ball away?" he asked. "So you can win," was the missionary's response. The local man, clad only in a loincloth, shook his head in bewilderment. This was uncivil. The goal of anything for him was working together as a community for the good of all. It was not in trying to rise above another man. The game continued but nobody followed the rules. When a player made it through all of the wickets, he went back and gave aid to his fellow players. As the final player moved through the last wicket, everyone cheered loudly.

Like those first-time croquet players, Paul had a better idea. The most important feature of a Christian and of a Christian community is not knowledge or persistence in the correct

opinion. Rather it is love. Later in the same letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes that love "is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."

Paul calls us to welcome and honor those whose points of view may be different from our own. This does not mean that we forget our differences or hold back on that which we see as important. Rather it means that we guard against a sense of self-righteousness and see differing views as a gift to expand our thinking rather than an obstacle to limit our progress. In doing so we remind ourselves that God's ways are not always our ways. In doing so, we honor God's love and acceptance of us all.