

UNINFLATED

“Knowledge puffs up, but loves builds up,” says Paul to a congregation he founded that is facing some internal challenges. I remember when I first told some of my colleagues that I had accepted a call to The First Church in Oberlin. Some asked, “How are you going to preach to all those PhDs?” My reply at the time was, “Well, I supposed they put their pants on one leg at a time like everyone else.” The value we place on knowledge doesn’t just stem from being in an academic community, it also part and parcel of the United Church of Christ which has long valued learned clergy to support the edification of its congregations.

But there’s more to it than just having academic credentials. It is not new that some hold those with degrees in suspicion. Perhaps, it’s because they’ve had a bad experience with someone who lorded their knowledge over them. When I was in seminary I had plastic coffee thermos that bore the university’s name and crest. Since I pretty much lived off caffeine, the mug went with me everywhere. After I graduated and settled in the community of my first church I continued to carry the mug because it reminded me of a time and place where I had been nurtured and had spent time with some of the most incredible people I had ever met. Others, read more into it. When I carried into a local ministerial meeting someone invariably commented with, “Oh, the guy from the university is here with all the answers.” It didn’t take long before I left that mug at home. One pastor, in trying to demarcate the difference between us put it this way, “I was called; you were sent” As in, “I was called by God with no need of schooling; you were simply sent to seminary.” For this particular individual, it probably didn’t help that I couldn’t the exact day and time when I had been converted to Christ.

It’s not just academic knowledge that can puff us up. Any knowledge, or special status that we think we possess, can be perverted into separating us from others; It can work against “building up” relationships in love. Paul is so concerned about the power of love that later in this first letter to the Corinthians he devotes an entire chapter to it. You’ve probably heard 1 Corinthians 13 recited umpteen times at weddings, although it’s not really speaking about the romantic love we often celebrate at such occasions. Love is the essential corrective to knowledge. Love is what helps us keep our knowledge in proper perspective.

When Paul says, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” The underlying Greek word for “puffs up” can be translated in variety of ways: “made proud or arrogant, become conceited, put on airs” It’s the same word Paul uses later in the letter when he says, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or *arrogant* or rude.” Love helps us recognize the limits of our knowledge.

Most of the PhDs I’ve come to know both as a student and as pastor have been some of the most humble people I’ve ever met. It seems that the more you know, the more you realize just how much you don’t know. That was brought home to me in my first semester in seminary when I was taking a class on patristics – that is the study of the earliest theologians of our faith those who wrote immediately after the New Testament era and pondered things like the nature of Christ and how God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit related to one another. My professor, Rowan

Greer, had an office packed floor to ceiling with nothing but books on this subject. In a lecture one day he confessed that even with all his study and knowledge he felt like he was just scratching the surface. If that's how he felt, imagine how his students felt.

In our lesson this morning, Paul is confronting an issue that has arisen in the Corinthian church. In a culture teeming with followers of various gods, most of who required some sort of animal sacrifice, what to buy at the marketplace and take home for dinner was an issue. It wasn't about whether or not one should eat meat or not; it was about where the meat came from. Lutheran pastor Mary Anderson sums it up nicely:

In cities like Corinth the common marketplace sold meat for a family's evening meal just as markets do today. But in Corinth, the butcher was a priest in service to some Greek or Roman deity. All butchering had religious significance—and the significance was *not* Christian. Early Christians had different theological views on what was ethical or permissible. Some thought it an insult to Christ to even purchase or consume meat roasted to tickle the nostrils of Zeus. Others said since Christians didn't believe in Zeus, the meat wasn't sacrificial, just nutritional. We can only imagine what first-century potluck dinners were like.

It would like trying to sort if the food you purchase at the local supermarket came from farmers who engage in sustainable practices. I remember when some college students tried to sort that out a few years ago and stick to a diet that involved only ingesting sustainable foods. It proved next to impossible since practically everything we eat goes on quite the circuitous route as moves from the farm to our table. For Paul, the problem isn't where the meat is coming from.

As one scholar notes:

For Paul, a piece of meat is a piece of meat. It does not matter if that meat was offered as a sacrifice to a false god in a pagan temple. Eating it will not hurt you. There's no actual power in it to do damage to you or to your faithfulness to God. But that's not the only consideration. Suppose that there is a covered-dish supper at your church. Someone brings a platter of food saying, "The local Satan-worshippers had a table set up at the mall giving away this food. It's delicious!" Would you eat it in front of everyone? There would be no actual power of Satan in the food. It would be fine to eat it. But how might that be interpreted by others? What impact might it have on a new convert or on someone who would take that to mean that there's no real difference between things offered to Satan and things offered to God? In a context where no one would have a problem with it, it would be fine. In a context where someone might be led to "fall" because of it, it would be wrong.

For us, the idea that food could lead to someone's undoing might seem a bit hard to believe. But there are other things that can divide us, like how we say the Lord's Prayer or what words we sing to the hymns or who gets to receive communion or whether you baptized as an infant or an adult, or whether you welcome LGBTQ folks into full participation in the life of the church. We can debate some of these matters and agree to disagree. But on others we must stand firm. This past Thursdays I tuned into a UCC webinar featuring the pastor of the Clackamas UCC church outside of Portland, OR. Vicki and I worshipped at this church while were visiting my

parents during my sabbatical. The congregation has become nationally known due to what has appeared on their church sign. Things like: “Our transgender siblings have heartbeats” “We stand with our Muslim siblings and work to end islamophobia” “Jesus called King Herod a fox because Jesus cares about politics” “Jesus was a person of color murdered by state sanctioned violence.” “Welcome immigrants but only if they speak English - said the Bible never” “Just love people. I will sort it out later – God.” During the webinar the pastor of the Clackamas church, Adam Ericksen shared about a man who confronted Adam about LGBTQ statement.

“I don’t agree with you but if I came here would you welcome me and could we have that conversation.” Adam’s response “No.” You can come here and be welcomed but as far as that conversation, it’s settled. Jesus settled it over 2000 years ago.”

There is can be a tension between what we believe is right and how we extend love to others. As we engage with others who may have strikingly different perspectives how do we negotiate this tension? For Paul, it all comes down to love. That doesn’t mean surrendering what you believe, but remembering that your knowledge is derivative. What we know comes out of our knowing that we are known by God, a God who loves us extravagantly, effusively. Living in that knowledge is humbling. I don’t know about you, but a good deal of the time I feel like I’m bumbling through faith. Trying to get it right – on a good day, and utterly missing the mark on others. I depend on God and the community of faith to hang in there with me, to grant me a broader perspective to steer me in the right direction, to forgive when I mess up and to love me regardless of what I know or don’t know.

In the days ahead, may God grant us the knowledge that we are indeed loved by God, so that as we encounter others, whatever knowledge of faith we may possess will be used for building up the body of Christ. The prayer of St. Francis states:

O Divine master grant that I may
 Not so much seek to be consoled as to console
 To be understood, as to understand.
 To be loved. as to love

May it be so.

AMEN.