

Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8: 1-13
February 1, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In this passage, the apostle Paul addresses one of many issues causing conflict in the Christian community in Corinth. The cause of the conflict is hard for us to understand; but the lesson Paul draws from the cause is important and worth the effort.

At the time of Paul's ministry the predominant religion of the Roman Empire was paganism. A multiplicity of gods governed nearly every aspect of life. All of these gods needed to be honored in order for humans to be sure of their good graces. To allow easy access to these gods there were temples. In Corinth there were any number of temples to the gods most vital to the prosperity of the city. The main way of pleasing the gods was to bring an animal to be slaughtered by the priest who would keep the best parts for himself and sell the rest to the local meat market for public consumption.

The problem was this: the new Christian faith, being a sect of the Jewish faith was in strong opposition to any form of idolatry. Idolatry is the worship of any thing or being other than the God of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian proclamation. Jews and Christians both taught that the gods of the Greeks and Romans were false gods. In the temples these gods were represented by stone figures. To worship these stone figures was an act of ignorance and an offence to the true God. To eat the meat that had been offered to the false god was to participate in the dangerous practice of idolatry.

Newly converted Jews and Christians were forbidden to have anything to do with the pagan temples. They were especially forbidden to eat food that had been offered to idols—that is, the stone statues representing the false gods.

There were, however, members of the Corinthian church who believed they were so spiritually advanced that these rules did not apply to them. They had what Paul calls “knowledge” which these new converts did not have. They had become enlightened and now realized that all of this fear of food offered to idols was superstition. Meat is meat no matter where it comes from. From Paul’s perspective these enlightened Christians are not wrong. Food is food. The problem comes from the *attitude* of superiority that comes from these so-called more spiritual people. They flaunt their freedom in front of the newly initiated. They belittle the new converts’ being so concerned about—to them anyway—unimportant—religious rule. The result is that the faith of the new disciples is undermined.

Thus Paul urges the so-called spiritually advanced not to use their “freedom” to lord it over others who are not at the same point of the journey. Instead he calls them, out of love to refrain from practices which injure the faith of those whose new faith is still tender and easily shaken.

This my friends is the larger point that applies as much to us today as it did nearly two thousand years ago in Corinth of ancient Greece. Paul captures this point in the distinction between “knowledge” and “love.” Perhaps quoting a common proverb, Paul states that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” In other words, knowledge has a tendency to make us feel superior to those who don’t know what we know.” I remember in the early days of my recovery from alcoholism how difficult it was to go parties where alcohol was served. This was

particularly true of church gatherings. I remember going to Louisville soon after I came here to a conference about pastoral support of clergy where in the very room where we met was a long table filled with beer and wine. I was still in early sobriety and this disturbed me greatly. When I said something about it the response was to throw a sheet over the bottles.

But love, Paul states, *builds up*. Literally love meets all people where they are. Love recognizes that a building does not begin with the top floor. A true and lasting building begins with a firm foundation where all the gifts are needed to raise the structure. No one's participation is unimportant. Those who "know" out of love seek to teach the ones who are new and inexperienced. Out of love those who are further along on the journey walk with those who may not be as far along. A loving community of Christ is one that moves together.

And here's a stunning fact. The true sign of one who is spiritually advanced is that she or he is far more impressed with how little she or he knows. One who is spiritually advanced recognizes that the wisdom of God makes distinctions among where people are in the journey of faith ludicrously trivial. We are all beggars looking for bread and sharing what we find with one another.

This is important as we approach this table of bread and grape juice which feeds us all.

Amen.