Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany

January 28, 2024

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

The British humorist Miles Kington said that knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, wisdom is not putting it in your fruit salad.

Paul tells us that our knowledge must be tempered not just by wisdom, but also by love. The purpose of knowledge, the use of knowledge, should not be making ourselves feel bigger and better than others. Nor should it be used to tear others down.

I like how *The Message* renders verse 2: “We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions—*but* sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds.”

Paul was concerned about how knowledge tempts us away from being humble and compassionate. He doesn’t judge the people on either side of the issue, or try to correct their theology. He doesn’t try to pull rank, or tell anyone they need to do something they’re not ready to do..

He simply insists that we remember that “what can be a liberating force for some” may be a stumbling block for others.[[1]](#endnote-1) With that in mind, we should tread carefully, ready to act with compassion and grace.

Paul’s writing reflects his Jewish faith and culture just as much as it reflects his belief about Jesus being the Messiah. He grew up with the understanding that there is both an individual and a communal nature to sin. That what we do and say affects others, within the community or not.

We see that understanding reflected in the words of the Lord’s Prayer. ***Our*** Father. Forgive ***us*** ***our*** sins, as ***we*** forgive others.

In that prayer, we’re not just asking God to forgive the things *we* as *individuals* have done or left undone. We’re not just asking for some communal sin to be forgiven.

We’re praying for God to forgive the sins of others, so that the world may move closer to God’s will for humanity. So God’s will may be done, on earth as in heaven.

And we see that understanding reflected in this portion of his letter to the church in Corinth. “Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block” for others.

What Paul’s essentially saying here is that just because you *can* do something doesn’t mean you *should.* What’s permissible isn’t beneficial if it’s going to be a stumbling block for others.

The thing is, this adds a whole layer of consideration to our daily lives that just feels *exhausting*. To have to think about every single action, every single word, in terms of how it will affect others is a ticket to overthinking *everything* and being mired in guilt and shame.

Luther tells us to sin boldly and trust even more boldly in God’s forgiveness. Which isn’t blanket permission to do whatever we want without thinking about the consequences, because we’re forgiven anyway. Instead, it’s encouragement to try to *not* overthink things, and trust that God’s going to both bless our imperfect attempts *and* forgive us when we fall short.

So how do we navigate our daily lives while trying to make sure that what we do and say doesn’t serve as a stumbling block for others? *And* help others to grow in their faith?

The Bible offers us guidance through both the Law and the example of Jesus’ life, teachings, and ministry.

The Law feels like an easier way to be sure we’re getting things right. Give us a list of things to do, which automatically gives us a list of things *not* to do, and then we can be certain we’re doing the right thing. And then we can teach everyone else what *they* should do. Right?

Except that it takes us right back to Paul’s concern. There were people for whom their understanding of God, their understanding of what’s acceptable – their *interpretation* of what Scripture says, their *interpretation* of what Jesus taught – told them that eating the meat that had been sacrificed on the altar to a Greek god was just fine.

But not everyone shared that interpretation. Not everyone was *ready* to share that interpretation.

Paul’s concern here isn’t who’s right and who’s wrong, but that everyone be treated with grace. He encourages the Corinthians to allow grace and humility to take precedence over their need for certainty, reminding them that their humble hearts can be more help than their proud minds.

But being right about things related to God feels important. How do we know when we should gently correct others – try to help them grow in their understanding of God – and when we should let go of our certainty that we’re right? Because some interpretations of Scripture *need* to be corrected. We *all* have things to learn about what it means to be faithful.

And this difficulty is compounded by the fact that we live in a society today that places a great deal of value on certainty. That says being humble and saying, “I don’t know,” or “I’m not sure”, that sees is a weakness. That says we don’t just need to have an opinion about *everything*, but we need to be ready, willing, and able to confidently defend our opinion. To talk over, to talk louder, so that we are heard, so that others know *just how right* we are.

How on earth do we uphold Paul’s teachings in this kind of climate?

If the people of Corinth knew what Paul says here, he wouldn’t have ncluded it in his letter. That he did tells us it was something that ran counter to how they experienced the world.

But it’s not just Paul’s writings that are countercultural. Jesus’ teachings are, too. In fact, pretty much *all* of the teachings of Scripture run counter to what we experience in the world. They insist we start from a position of *agape* love – love of God and active concern for the well-being of all that God has created.

Observing the Sabbath means we step back from producing and consuming, so that not just we, but *all* may have a time of rest. Not coveting what our neighbors doesn’t just mean we learn to appreciate what we have. It allows us to celebrate the joys and mourn the sorrows of our neighbor.

Learning to temper our knowledge with wisdom and love means we learn how to use our knowledge to build up, rather than tear down. It means we learn to value humility instead of certainty.

We are people of *faith*. Not people of certainty. We are freed from many things, including the burden of needing to be right about everything. Freed from that burden, we have room to grow in our faith and to hear the myriad ways God speaks to us through others.

May the love of God the Father and the example of Jesus allow you to hear the Holy Spirit guiding you in all that you say and do.

1. Melanie Howard, *workingpreacher.org* commentary on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, January 31, 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)