

Built By Love

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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Recognition and Commissioning of Ministries
January 29, 2012

Readings (<http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=63>)

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Text: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." -- 1 Corinthians 8:1b

Paul said to the church at Corinth and he says to the church at Richmond Heights, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." That's the text I'd like for us to attend to this morning, as we recognize the start of new ministries in this place.

Let's begin by acknowledging right off that we have to read this half-verse sensibly and be mindful of the danger of lifting verses or parts of verses out of their context. Paul mentions knowledge and love, but this passage is not about them in the abstract; it's about the real hazards of Christians with varying degrees of insight – knowledge, in Paul's language – trying to function together as a community.

The occasion for Paul to take up this topic is food offered to idols. Many of the first Christians at Corinth had been Greco-Roman pagans, and part of their civic religion was offering animal sacrifices to the various gods who were the patrons of their city or region. After an animal was slaughtered and the sacrificial rites were observed, the meat was distributed to the participants; for many ordinary people in the ancient world, this would have been one of the few times when they got to taste meat. This was the way sacrifice was observed in ancient Israel, too, except that the offering was made to Yahweh, whom we know in our Bibles as "the Lord."

The first people Jesus called to be his followers were Jewish, but as that mission foundered – or as Paul's mission to the Gentiles overtook it – more and more Christians were drawn from the ranks of pagans, and that seems to be the case with the Corinthian church. The folks there were drawn from the different strata of society in the very cosmopolitan trading city of Corinth, which, at its height, rivaled Athens and Thebes in wealth and power.

And as is the case in all societies, Corinth had a form of civic religion that everyone was expected to participate in, which the first converts to Christianity, being good Corinthian citizens, did. The conversion of many of these folks from the civic cult to the cult of Jesus the Christ was gradual, just as the conversion from Judaism had been for many Jewish converts, and both groups continued to participate in both their earlier and latter religions for some time.

Some of the Corinthian Christians knew early on that polytheism was a sham, and so the meat offered to idols was just plain meat, but others – of weak conscience, as Paul says – weren't so sure. They were scandalized by Christians nonchalantly eating meat leftover from pagan sacrifices. And those who saw nothing wrong with it – those with

knowledge, Paul says, were ready to dismiss the concerns of their co-believers with an impatient wave of the hand.

Careful, Paul says in today's lesson. That superior, dismissive attitude is dangerous in a community, especially a small one. The attitude that a few "get it" and the rest are wandering in benighted ignorance is destructive to a community that understands itself as the risen body of Christ.

The body of Christ is a unity, it's not a collection of parts. It's greater than the sum of its parts. A church has an identity that transcends the identities and the activities of the individuals who make it up. Faith United Church of Christ isn't just Barb or Jim or Ron or Lois, and it isn't just Barb or Jim or Ron or Lois when they're in the same room doing the same thing at the same time, as we are here this morning. Faith United Church includes them, certainly, but it's more than them, individually and collectively.

A church's essential identity isn't human, it's divine. What makes a church a church is not our knowledge of God or Jesus or our desire to be their followers or even our actions toward that end. What makes a church a church is the Holy Spirit, which is another name for God, which is another name for love. It God's love lived out in us, when all is said and done, that makes a church a church, and without that love a church falls to pieces, sooner or later.

In a few minutes, we're going to recognize the ministries in this church, the ones that are new and the ones that are continuing. The members of the Ministry Leadership Council will be recognized and commissioned in particular, as our church constitution directs us to do, but all the ministries that make up the living, breathing life of this member of the body of Christ will be recognized.

We used to call this service the installation of officers, but we realize now that this top-down model doesn't work very well anymore; officers may be legally responsible for an incorporated institution such as our church, but it's the ministries of people in this place and elsewhere that give our church its human, public identity. That's why they're important and that's why we recognize them and tell the people involved in them how much we love them.

Yes, knowledge is indeed important, make no mistake about that, and members of MLC need to have it and use it wisely in the service of God and this congregation in the coming year, and I believe they will.

But love is more important than knowledge, and it is the love we show for one another here, for those who come to this place as guests, and for those we encounter in our daily lives that matters more.

You don't have to like in order to love. In fact, confusing like and love is one of the major impediments to our spiritual growth. There are lots of things about nature I don't like, but I love nature because it is God's creation, God's gift to me and to everyone and everything, and our earthly home. Creation, in and of itself, is worthy of love, irrespective of my personal likes and dislikes.

The body of Christ, the church, works the same way. It has plenty of problems, to be sure, and plenty of unlikeable aspects, but those who lead it, and lead it well, will lead it in love more than knowledge because they recognize something worthy of their best selves in it.

In the church of my childhood we used to sing "Give of your best to the Master," and the church is the vehicle dedicated to helping us, all of us, do that. It's not the only place we can do it, of course, but historically it has much to say in its favor. Try to think of another institution that has remained as recognizable as the Christian church across more than two thousand years; they're hard to come by. That great institution, founded on the knowledge and love of God and of God's child, Jesus the Christ, has seen rulers

come and go, empires rise and fall, ideologies capture our attention and allegiance and then collapse. And the church continues in its mission of bearing the message of the gospel – that God so loved the world – to every place and every time.

Long after Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and all the other atheists and neo-atheists are historical footnotes or forgotten altogether, the body of Christ, if it is being built by love and not puffed up by knowledge, will be alive and well. And we are privileged, here, in our little patch, to be a part of that. Thanks be to God.