

Corinth was an important port city, and there were lots of intelligent and wealthy people there. They were caught up with their own power, charisma, and spirituality. The Apostle Paul spends a lot of energy in this letter teaching them about the value of humility and love. Oh, don't we all love to be right and to be seen as taking the high moral ground.

Take for example the couple who is having a heated debate. And the one says, "I don't want to argue with you about this." And the other says, "I'm not arguing. I'm explaining why I'm right." It is not enough to be right. It is not enough to be free. We must lay aside our freedom and our concern with winning, being right, to be concerned for the other. And not just as couples. On this monumental day when we ordain and install our next group of elders, when we step into our new sanctuary and give thanks to God, we must remember that faith and hope are great, knowledge is wonderful, but love is supreme. Love is what really matters and love builds up the other.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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. (NRS)

Have you heard the joke about the three Christians walked into a church while 1 Corinthians 8 was being read? The first one said, "I think it is funny that Paul says knowledge puffs up in a chapter on food." The next one says, "Knowledge without love can make us arrogant." The third one says, "Well, that might be a problem for SOME people."

The trouble with arrogance is that it is so easy to see in others and so difficult to see in ourselves. Arrogance is insecurity all dressed up with no where to go. The secure person does not need to be loud or impressive or puffed up about all he or she can do or has done. No, in fact, to be focused on love means that I voluntarily limit my own freedom in order to build up another's dignity. Just because I have a right to do something does not make it right to do.

There are no perfect analogies in our day with this first century issue. But I'll still share a few imperfect ones: Most of us at Peace are comfortable and secure in our own Christian faith, such that we find no problem being in close friendship as a congregation with the local mosque and having Buddha's birthday celebrated here on our campus. Some Christians might be troubled by these interfaith commitments, but we feel called to build these bonds. Some other examples of being sensitive to others: So the skinny person does not talk proudly about weight, while serving up a big bowl of ice cream in front of one who is trying to diet. The highly-educated person does not boast of his or her graduate degrees trying to impress a group of people that includes folks without the opportunity of

college. The person who can drink alcohol is careful not to be a stumbling block to someone who is in addiction recovery. The seminary-trained persons in the church do not insensitively take the theological conversations into Greek and Hebrew and doctrinal concepts that are difficult for others in the room. The progressive Christian who understands that love is love, who values marriage equality is careful in speaking truth to those still bound by traditional values, hoping to gently persuade a brother or sister in the faith. The person of color understands the need to call for justice with respect to the one who is not yet “woke” on racism or implicit bias. The one who knows God loves the whole world, all the people in every country, is patient with the one who lives in the box of American exceptionalism, seeking to build a bridge of conversation from which the other can might see the humanity of all of us.

Knowledge or spiritual maturity should never be used as a weapon. Richard Hays says “Rather than asserting rights and privileges, we are to shape our actions toward the edification (building up) of our brothers and sisters in the community of faith.” Love is far more important than being right about some social, theological, or political issue. It’s just a few chapters later that Paul says words that you have heard at many weddings. Most of us say we love these words, but do we really? **1 Corinthians 13:1** *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (NRS)*

Socrates said, “The only true wisdom is in knowing that you know nothing.” Richard Rohr expands on that, “People who have had any genuine spiritual experience always know **that they don’t know**. They are utterly humbled by mystery. They are in awe at the abyss of it all, in wonder at eternity and depth, and a Love which is incomprehensible to the mind.”

Speaking of mystery, today we have the privilege of writing beautiful prayers, scripture, hymns and spiritual quotes on the walls of a new sanctuary. Someone will need to write one for our two guys who were hospitalized with pneumonia this week: Wes Rineer asked for us to write one for him, and Bob Donaldson is counting on someone writing Psalm 127:1 for him: *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it, labor in vain.* Gia and I got a headstart this week-end. She wrote Psalm 150, of course, my first scripture on the wall this week is this: Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.

We have the blessing of ordaining and installing elders today. One of the questions they will be asked is this: Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church? This eighth chapter of 1 Corinthians has helped us see that we cannot focus on purity. No we must also be concerned for peace and unity. We value the relationship over asserting ourselves about being right. Imagine with me a church, even a world, in which relational integrity is more highly valued than the freedom to assert one's own moral certitude.