

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 31, 2021

"FAITH BEYOND BELIEF"

Psalm 111 ~ 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 ~ Mark 1:21-28

I don't want to brag, but I'm a pretty good student. It all started back in elementary school when I learned that Southern Maid Donuts in Midland, Texas would give me a free donut for every "A" on my report card. They were great donuts, too, big and soft and covered with sweet sticky glaze! I studied hard, got a good education, learned how to learn, and it was always fueled by a deep love of knowledge ... but a deeper love for donuts. So here I am, two degrees in hand ... a B.A. and a Master of Divinity. You know whether you have a formal degree or on-the-job-training, education is important. Knowledge is a good thing. But it isn't the best thing. Being loved is better. And loving is best of all.

That's what Paul told the smarty-pants Corinthians when they were lording their knowledge over some of the dim bulbs among them. It was all about eating meat offered to idols, a big deal in those days. Worship was a messy affair in most ancient religions. Sheep and goats and oxen were slaughtered and set before the idols in the pagan temples. But the idols didn't eat much. And there was more meat than the priests could barbecue for themselves. So, they ate their fill, then sold the rest and made a tidy profit. It was good meat, too, because you didn't offer up second best to the gods. You were supposed to give the gods the best you had ... just like we're supposed to give our God the best we have ... the first cut of our income ... the best of our time ... our greatest energies. Most Jews and Christians wouldn't touch this meat that the pagans sold, though. It wasn't kosher, and it seemed spiritually connected to the altars where it had been offered.

In those days Christians gathered for worship on the first day of the week, celebrated the resurrection, shared communion, and then sat down to a covered dish luncheon that they called "the love feast." All kinds of problems arose with the love feast at Corinth. In the first place

they weren't sharing with each other. The rich folks laid out a full seven course meal while the poor folks were eating egg salad sandwiches on day old bread. Or going hungry. And the folks in the middle ate their tuna casseroles ... jealous of the rich folks and contemptuous of the poor. It made communion seem a sham, because there wasn't any "love" in the love feast. Paul had to tell the Corinthians that the church is no place for divisions of wealth and class because we are all equals at the table of Christ.

But wealth and class weren't the only divisions among the Corinthians. One day at the love feast, one of the well to do deacons pulled out a hibachi and threw a slab of ribs on the grill. It was Grade A Prime quality beef, and everybody knew where it came from. Some of the visitors are so offended so they just picked up their Tupperware and left ... never to darken the doors of the church again. Others confronted the offenders and challenged them about its source. Naturally, the Corinthian carnivores got defensive. "There's nothing wrong with eating this meat," they argued. "We know that 'no idol in the world really exists.' We know 'there is no God but one.' We know we aren't going to be haunted by spirits. And we know it tastes good, too. And if you were as spiritual as we are ... and really believed there is only one God and idols don't really exist ... you would eat this meat, too. Here, take a bite." It was a regular donnybrook in Corinth that day, so they wrote Paul to ask his opinion.

Well, Paul agreed with them about the meat. The barbecue wasn't demon possessed. The idols didn't exist, except in the minds of those who worshipped them. So, the Corinthian idol meat eaters were right. They had the superior theological knowledge about dietary do's and don'ts. But they were missing the point. Doing the right thing in the wrong way ... Paul told them ... can be as damaging as doing the wrong thing. They were wrong to boast about their knowledge. They were wrong to be contemptuous of the sensibilities of their less knowledgeable brothers and sisters. They were wrong not to care how their behavior might affect the people around them.

Knowledge has its limits. Being smart doesn't necessarily make you a better person in terms of character or ethics. Knowledge may improve your life ... but by itself education doesn't make you a good person.

This is especially true of religious knowledge. We've all come across those people who know the Bible backwards and forwards ... and it makes them insufferable, arrogant, judgmental souls ... bashing everyone around them for not being as righteous as they think they are.

There's a slogan taught to clergy wannabes in seminary: "*They aren't going to care how much you know ... until they know how much you care.*" Years ago, Helmut Thielicke wrote a book for seminarians called *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. He described a young man who comes to Christ in a fervent church, so he naturally feels called to bear witness. He leads Bible studies from his heart without any reference to the commentaries or theologians, and the people love him. They encourage him to enter the ministry, so off he goes to seminary. After his first semester he comes home, and the people find him horribly changed. Now, when he leads their Bible studies, he presents the latest form-critical analysis of the text, and responds to their comments by saying, "That's typically pietistic," or "You belong to the school of Osiander, which has not yet comprehended the forensic character of justification." And they are appalled. In short, Thielicke says, the student had grown intellectually, but not spiritually. He had "a merely conceptual experience" of these theological principles. He could talk about the great ideas of Martin Luther, but he had no understanding of the life experiences which brought them into being. Nor did he care to connect with the life experiences of the people whom he was teaching. Knowledge without love leads to arrogance.

I think of the story one of my professors told, about the time he was speaking on a college campus and went to visit a young man from his hometown in his dorm room. The room was a study in contrasts. The fellow he was visiting had several Playboy pinups and rock band posters on the wall above his bed. Above the bed on the other side the room were several Jesus posters and a shelf of Bible commentaries and religious books. "I see your roommate is a Christian,"

my professor observed. "Oh, yeah," the young man said. "He sure loves Jesus, but he doesn't give a damn about me."

"They aren't going to care how much you know ... until they know how much you care." It's good advice for every Christian, and exactly what Jesus demonstrates in our gospel story today. It is the first miracle Mark reports, and he notes how impressed the people were by it. *"They were all amazed,"* Mark tells us, *"and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'"* (Mark 1:27). What an interesting choice of words! They call what Jesus did "a new teaching, with authority." Does Mark simply leave out the teaching Jesus gave on this occasion? Like a lot of people, maybe no one remembered exactly what Jesus said that day. I am embarrassed when someone asks me to comment on a sermon that I gave a month or two ago. I have to think hard to remember what I said. Sometimes, I even have to go look it up. My memory isn't that good. But I always remember the preacher who encouraged me to go to seminary. I couldn't tell you the content of a single sermon he preached. But I remember how much he loved people. I remember how much he loved me. And that was what impressed me. Perhaps no one remembered the content of Jesus' teaching that day, but they were impressed by the love with which he taught and healed this man of his demons.

Then again, I suppose the healing itself was a teaching of a kind. Jesus had authority beyond that of the scribes. To this day rabbis, preachers, seminary professors, and a lot of Sunday School graduates love to talk about God. We can sit for hours and talk about what the Bible means ... what it really says ... what God is like ... and why the world is the way it is if God is who God is supposed to be. But somewhere, sometime, somehow, we have to flesh out our conversations in the life choices we make ... in the way we treat the people around us ... in the other things we do with our time. That's the acid test for all of us rabbis, preachers, seminary professors, and Sunday School graduates: we can talk the talk, but do we walk the walk? Jesus embodied his teaching. That's where his authority came from.

God is never predictable, and we should never be so sure we know the mind of God. A little bit of learning can go to your head ... and even if you've studied a whole lifetime about God, you have only "a little bit of knowledge" about God. We have what God has revealed to us in scripture and we should study it. But what scripture gives us is a God who is always surprising us with unexpected justice and mercy ... and always more than our best sages and theologians can understand. What scripture gives us is not a God we can fathom with our puny minds ... but a God who loves us and loves us and loves us beyond our belief.

Paul is right. Love is more important than knowledge. We don't remember Jesus as the smartest person who ever lived. We don't remember his academic achievements or celebrated writings. We remember "greater love has no one than this than to lay his life down for his friends." So, who is really smarter in the end? The person who knows a lot ... or the person who loves a lot?

We don't know whether the Corinthian barbecue bingers ever got Paul's point. They seemed to have had all the spiritual gifts except the love that Paul told them was the greatest and most necessary gift of all. *"And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love"* (1 Cor. 13:13). Love is even more important than belief. And knowledge isn't even in the top three!

We don't know about the Corinthian carnivores, but the rest of the church got it, because they held on to Paul's letter and it became an enduring word from God. At least some of the rest of the church got it. Oakland Christian UCC certainly did! Contrast what was happening at Corinth with what happens at our communion table every month. We have no divisions of race, creed, color, class, sexual orientation, or even theology at the table of the church. All of God's children are welcomed. All of God's children are fed. All of God's children are treated with dignity and respect. This is the church which Paul envisioned, loving all people in the name of Christ. You should invite others to join us and see for themselves.

May we pray?

Loving God,

We love you because you first loved us. We trust you because you love us. We follow you because you love us. So Lord, teach us to love, too. Teach us to love. Amen.