



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## When Knowledge Is Not Enough

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

February 1, 2009

*Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)*

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

If you've eaten in a Chinese restaurant in the past decade, then you know there's been a subtle shift in what gets put into the fortune cookie they give you with the bill. It used to be that you would get a fortune—you know, something along the lines of “you will meet a person who will change your life forever,” or “you will be rich one day.”

It's rare to get those nowadays. No, fortune cookies today are more likely to be what I call “pithy saying cookies.” They most often contain common-sense phrases instead of predictions. You're more likely to read things like “a kind word turns away anger” or “don't worry about tomorrow” than anything else.

Today's passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reads a bit like a collection of those pithy sayings. It wouldn't be surprising, in fact, to open up a cookie at the restaurant this afternoon and read something like these phrases in our passage today: “Food will not bring us close to God.” Or, “Knowledge puffs up.” Or the second part, “Love builds up.”

In fact, this whole section from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter reminds me of one pithy saying I once opened myself: “Having the right to do something doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.”

That is, after all, what Paul is wrestling with here, and while the issues may have changed for us—it's rare to meet someone concerned about eating meat offered to idols—the underlying issue remains. How in God's name are we to live as individual followers of Jesus Christ—with different experiences and understandings from others—but to do so in community with one another? What Paul is thinking through with those squabbling Corinthians is how to balance the rights of individuals who make up the community with the community's health as a whole.

It's clear from his letter that there are some people in the Corinthian congregation who have set themselves up as the end-all and be-all of what it means to be spiritual. And, while it's a great thing to have people with spiritual depth and knowledge in a congregation—which Paul affirms—he also points out to the congregation again and again how dangerous it can be to the community's health if an attitude of superiority sets in.

And that is what has happened in Corinth. There are some in the community there who pride themselves on how well they know the word. They are taking pride in their knowledge at the expense of others in the community, especially among the newest converts. The issue at hand is whether or not one can eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

Those who claim superior knowledge argue that idols do not exist—there is only one God in the world, which means that the meat has been sacrificed to “nothing,” which proves that they are free to do as they please. Their superior knowledge gives them this

freedom.

And Paul agrees with their reasoning. They do, Paul would tell us, have their theology correct. As he writes in another place, "for freedom Christ has set them free." In that context they are indeed free to eat the meat in question. But here is a situation in which knowledge is not enough. They know the word, but they are not living by the larger demands of it. If they were living as isolated Christians apart from anyone else, it wouldn't be a problem. But, and you know it as well as I do, to be a Christian is to be connected to others. In baptism, we are reminded that we belong to God. And because we belong to God, we also belong to one another.

It's clear that there are some others in the Corinthian congregation who are not nearly so knowledgeable, so advanced or secure in the faith, who, having just left their idols behind, are not secure enough to be exposed to such risks. Which leads to Paul's question: Might not the conduct of those with superior knowledge encourage those who are weak to fall back into their former religious practices and risk their own destruction? This is not only an abuse of Christian freedom, says Paul, it is nothing less than a sin against Christ himself.

There are times in life when knowledge is not enough. There is a higher principle that must be at work in the community of the word than mere knowledge of it—even superior knowledge. That principle is the spirit behind the word, the rule of love. Authentic obedience to the word we have been given demonstrates itself in love and concern for others in the community or it reveals that it has never understood that word from the beginning, but is only being used as a self-serving safety net.

Paul will continue to argue that this word among us is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that to know the gospel truly is not only to experience Christ's gifts of freedom and peace, but to use that freedom and peace in the unity of love. It is not enough simply to know about Jesus Christ and his gospel. Knowing about him is one thing; living out of his gospel and his power is quite another.

What we are talking about is what Laura Mendenhall calls "the limitations imposed by love." Whether you are familiar with that phrase or not, you have no doubt felt those limitations in your relationships with those you love.

As most of you know, I the preaching group I'm part of has met the first week in January in Malibu for the past three years. You have heard of my ongoing search for Britney Spears, including 2 sermons that reflected on that search. That prompted one of our retired ministers to ask if I were working on a 3-sermon series, and he was dying to know what I would do if I ever did find Britney. So let me answer that question for you who are curious—Not much. My love for Alayne and my commitment to her have imposed some limitations on what I can and can't do—even in—especially in—sunny Malibu.

When I think about it, my love for my children has imposed limitations on my life as well. Over the years, I have tried to make sure that I left my work in time to be with them in significant—and not so significant—times, that I could be home with them when they were sick if needed, that I was able to go to dance recitals and school programs. On occasion, I imagine how much more I could get done if I didn't have these commitments. However, while I fantasize about more commitment to my work, it is always my family

who came first. As I figure it, those are the limitations imposed by love.

Looking back, I now realize how much my family has given me, how I became a better pastor because of them, how glad I am that I heeded those limitations imposed by my love for them. It is with this understanding regarding the limits imposed by love that I read the letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. Paul was trying to help a church family through a squabble. It appears that some would like to be free to eat food that had been used in the worship of idols. Since they knew that these idols were no threat to the one true God, that this food was just food, then there was no reason to waste good food. However, others in the church family still worried about the idols. These folks believed that to eat the food that had been used in the worship of idols was to lessen their devotion to God. What was this church family to do?

Paul agreed that there was nothing wrong with eating this food except that to do so would not take seriously the concerns of those who still worried that this would link them with idol worshippers. Consequently, the limitations imposed by love dictate that they not eat the food. Even though those concerned about eating the food were wrong, love for one another took precedence over principles.

As Paul said later in this letter, "Love does not insist on its own way." And so while we acknowledge the importance of knowledge and of freedom, we also acknowledge that what must determine our behavior is our love for one another. We are not free to think only of our own response to a situation. We have to take in account those affected by our actions. The health of the body of Christ—the church—takes priority over our knowledge and our freedom. These are the limitations imposed by love.

Paul does not seem concerned about what impact eating the food might have on those outside the church. He is, however, concerned about what sort of witness is made when others see the church squabbling with one another. Therefore, those in the church in Corinth had to be concerned when some could not shake the notion that eating food associated with idols was a sin. While Paul does not consider this food to be a sin, he does believe that it would be a sin to cause members of the family to act against their conscience.

For Christians, there is a value higher than our knowledge and our freedom. For our knowledge of God is limited and finite anyway, and our freedom does not release us from our responsibility for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are bound to live within the limitations imposed by love.

Love welcomes those with very different outlooks—Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female—to be one in Christ. Love works to keep the various segments of the community from splintering into warring factions. Love is the only way those with different points of view can experience genuine community in Christ. Love means that each one of us has to know that we have to be the one making the compromise. It is not somebody else who needs to compromise for us. These are the limitations imposed by love.

Such limitations do not mean that we avoid conflict. In fact, Paul insisted that this particularly difficult issue in the life of the early church be confronted. The church was exactly the place for these difficult discussions. Paul simply urges that every member of the community be taken seriously, for knowledge does not belong to any one segment of

the church. Good, intelligent, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ will interpret Scripture differently. Therefore, we must listen to one another, really listen, not in order to correct one another but in order to learn from one another.

That's one of the ways I describe you to others when they ask about our congregation. I describe us as a place where people who disagree live out of their baptismal identity together. I tell folks how I think you like to be around people who disagree with you and don't seem to mind the differences.

I remember one conversation when I shared that with someone thinking about becoming a member here. He asked, "So people want to be around others who disagree? Is that so that they can defend what they believe?"

"That's part of it," I said, "but really it's about listening to and learning from others. It's about bumping up against someone who disagrees so that you can be stretched and grow."

In just a couple of weeks, our sisters and brothers from Shenandoah Presbytery will gather here in this sanctuary to discuss some incredibly important—but also divisive—issues. And my hope for that meeting is that we will take time to listen to each other, and that we will outdo one another in showing honor.

I say that because I believe that what Laura Mendenhall once wrote is true: "Our differences are not because some are stupid and some are smart, not because some are virtuous and others are wicked; rather, the life experiences of some cause them to interpret Scripture one way, whereas others, out of their life situations, have a different interpretation, and at some point, it does not even matter who is right and who is wrong, because Christ has called us to live together as the church. Therefore, dialogue becomes our protection against self-righteousness. For without the ministry of our opponents, we can easily become proud and pretentious, cutting ourselves off from the work of grace by judging our faith and practice to be so correct that we do not think we need grace. Knowledge has the power to convince us that being right is of the highest value. Yet, Paul warns the church in Corinth knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge."

"Scripture calls us to hold our convictions but always with humility. It is more important to be loving than to be right. These are the limitations imposed by love."

As is often the case, the resolution of differences was important to the life of the church in Corinth. Their central act of worship was the Lord's Supper, eating a meal together. If they had allowed each one to do as their conscience directed them at this meal, their community would have been destroyed. It was a classic standoff between liberals who believed they can eat the meat and conservatives who believed eating the meat was strictly forbidden. Surely, there was a temptation to claim an irreconcilable impasse rather than to work for reconciliation, but to say irreconcilable would be an affront to the Christ who called us to be a church together. So Paul reminded them to be on the lookout for the strong convictions of knowledge and the fervent passion of freedom that could puff them up and cut them off from one another.

Likewise, we need to commit ourselves to the love that builds up. Paul calls us to recognize when the limitations imposed by love take away the weight of being right.

Surely, Paul's words to the church in Corinth continue to speak to us today, calling us to step forward, to recognize the limitations imposed by love, and to play a reconciling role in our families and in our church family. Surely, Paul's words to the church in Corinth continue to lift up for us the importance of our commitment to the body of Christ, the church. This does not mean we hold back on our differences, but, rather, that we see our diversity as God's gift to us, a guard against self-righteousness, and a reminder that God's ways are not our ways. We need one another in order to more fully discern the will of God.

Paul calls us to welcome and accept those with differing points of view in ways that honor and reflect the Lord's welcome and acceptance of each one of us. So may we continue to live within the limitations imposed by love in our homes and in God's house and may we be blessed with a continuance of God's love that is big enough to hold all the pain in the world.

Thanks be to God for such a love in Jesus Christ, the One who is the head of the church. Amen.