

“Love Builds Us Up”
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
January 28, 2018
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In today’s Scripture reading, the Apostle Paul clearly cuts to the point of my whole message with one sentence. He states simply but powerfully in verse 1, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” This summarizes the whole point of our Christian faith, too!

The Apostle Paul makes a dramatic contrast between knowledge and love in the letter to the Corinthian Christian fellows. He says, “Having good knowledge is a good thing, but if you have knowledge only, it will lead to pride.” The word, *puff* describes ‘a brief sudden emission of air, vapor, or smoke’. The arrogance of knowledge does not do anything good for others but just for your self-contentment. Paul warns that it will disappear soon like smoke in the air. Paul appeals to his Corinthian church and us not to pursue your self-pride, but earnestly pursue love which can help others. Eugene Peterson in his paraphrased Bible, *The Message* interprets this sentence in a simpler way, “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. (The Message)”

Eugene Peterson understands Christian love in a context of humbleness, but Christian love has much deeper meanings. Paul simplifies that love builds us up! What Christ Jesus taught his disciples and us is that love empowers others with our humble hearts. Truly Paul wanted his fellows to care for one another, be accountable to one another and lift up one another in Christ Jesus’ loving and humble hearts! In Christian faith, love does not mean your excellence, but it is more about accountability, sense of community and belonging as one body of Christ as community. *These constitute Christian love!* Simply saying, love is not just your liking but your faithfulness, responsibility and humble heart for your people in the community. Are you faithful?

A Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas hilariously re-defines Christian marriage in his understanding of Christian love. He says, “When people say, “I love you” in marriage, usually it means that you fit my personality fairly well. How can we understand other as other? Marriage is not determined by love but a sense of faithfulness to one another. Faithfulness is a defining mark in understanding

what love is. Christians are obligated to love one another even if they are married! The point is how does marriage result in a holiness of community.”¹

Today’s Scripture reading may not be a relevant story any more to our contemporary life time. If you want to understand the Apostle Paul’s advice to the Corinthian Christians, you need to take yourself back to 61 A.D. and put yourself in their life’s context. I will briefly give you a short summary of our Scripture reading and its background. In Apostle Paul’s time and in the Roman world, most meat for sale in the market came from pagan temples. The animals were ritually sacrificed and butchered. For example, if you were invited to your friend’s house and were to receive a meal like mutton, but that sheep had been ritually butchered in the presence of your friend’s favorite idol, what would you do as a Christian? An ethical challenge was this; if you as a Christian eat that mutton, you are indirectly participating in worship of idols. If you condone idolatry, what would you do? Can a good Christian eat that sacrificed meat? This may not be a morally sensitive issue to you, but it was a serious ethical question in Paul’s time and to the Corinthian Christians. Paul’s answer was clear. He says, “Idols are not real. They are nothing but statues made by human hands. There’s no moral issue here. *However*, Paul says that you should set aside your freedom if exercising it troubles people you care about.”²

What the Apostle Paul challenges us in his letter is not intended to give us an absolute and correct moral answer. But how love will work and help out even in ethical dilemmas. Stanley Hauerwas reminds us of Christian love in his essay, “Love and Marriage”

For genuine love requires the recognition of the other as other, as a being not under our power. Instead, we often assume that love is greater the more it is shared in a common purpose. [That] diminishes our otherness. Such a notion of love gives the basis for the most perverse forms of love as the self avenges its loss by hating as well as loving the other. Thus, as we become the object of such perverse love, we are recognized as somebody who has our name and our looks—but who is denied recognition as the other... The limits of our ability to love, however, help us to see the extraordinary claim made about love and friendship Jesus declares he has for each of us... The miracle of God’s love is that he can

² An excerpt from Rev. Michael L. Lindvall’s sermon, “Correct but Not Right (1.29.2012)” The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
<https://www.brickchurch.org/Customized/uploads/BrickChurch/Worship/Sermons/PDFs/2012/012912b.pdf> Accessed Jan.25 2018

and does love each of us as other than himself without becoming less of a friend to any of us. Thus, we are commanded (John 15) to love the other, but to love as those who are first loved of such a God. For God's love stretches our souls as he makes us his friends by freeing us of our preoccupation with ourselves and thus opening us to friendships with others... Thus we are commanded to love one another, not because we do not wish to love, but because we must learn to love as he has taught us.³

Paul emphasizes that seeking knowledge may also lead you to truth and intelligence, but it won't lead you to find love. Rev. Michael L. Lindvall, the Brick Presbyterian church, quoting a French moral philosopher Jacques Maritain once said that "Christianity has taught us that love is worth more than intelligence." He passionately reminds of the core of Christianity, "truth matters, but love matters even more. Being right matters, but relationships matter even more."⁴ What the Apostle Paul teaches us is that we Christians are called to practice love not knowledge. We are called to make effort to build up our relationships not pursuing our individual excellence. Simply, it is like married life. Looking back on my last 10 years of married life, I have learned an important lesson that I should not dare to 'correct' or 'change' my wife, even though I may think that I am right. Simply it will not work! But I am married to understand, care for and support my wife as much as I can. And it is too hard!

The Apostle Paul directly challenges us to think about self-pride. It may collide with a need of your love for your community. What will be your attitude and choice? In the Bible, Jesus, the Apostle Paul and other disciples devoted their lives witnessing and practicing love through their lives. What we find about God's love in our Christian faith is not pride mind but humble heart.

We, Christians are favored by God's love and called to witness and practice love in our faith community and beyond. Love is the only reason that we gather together and build this faith community. Let us love each other fully and faithfully as Jesus did for us. Amen.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, "Love and Marriage" http://thecresset.org/Hauerwas/June_1977.html Accessed Jan.25 2018

⁴ Ibid.