

Epiphany 4 B 2018

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 28, 2018

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today is the fourth Sunday after Epiphany. During the Sundays after Epiphany— between Christmas and Lent— our Sunday services include segments from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And then a year from now, in Epiphany 2019, there will be more segments read on those Sundays from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. One dose of First Corinthians in winter 2018. And another dose of First Corinthians in winter 2019.

It so happens that next winter, on this fourth Sunday after Epiphany— which will be Superbowl Sunday next year— Superbowl 53, in Atlanta— On this Sunday next year, the First Corinthians reading will be the famous love passage. Frequently read at weddings. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. It's kind of the dramatic climax of First Corinthians. A poem about love. Written by a man who was never married. Who discouraged people from getting married. But his words about love are read at most weddings. And will be read here in worship on Superbowl Sunday 2019. Superbowl 53. Atlanta. The New England Patriots versus somebody.

Today's reading from First Corinthians is earlier in the letter. It also mentions love. This morning we read: *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* And although Paul is writing to the congregation in Corinth— the Corinthians— about divisions in their congregation, I think these words are in some sense wise for our society today. Our communities and our social institutions. Our civics and our politics.

The argument that Paul is making throughout most of First Corinthians is about a conflict between *knowledge* and *love*. We often hear about and think about a conflict between *faith* and *science*. Or between *religion* and *science*. But Paul is talking about a struggle in the community between *knowledge* and *love*.

And the *knowledge* he is talking about is not science. And it isn't wisdom. And it isn't history or literature or mathematics. We have no reason to believe that Paul was against those things. No, what Paul is talking about when he puts knowledge in contrast with love is how a basic religious fact or truth can be used as a club to bully and beat other people. And in this morning's reading from First Corinthians you will see three statements that are enclosed in quotation marks. And those three quotations are the slogans, the knowledge, that is being used to bully and beat other people.

The slogans in quotation marks today are: “All of us possess knowledge.” “No idol in the world really exists.” And “There is no God but one.” These are slogans. These are fundamentally true statements that are being marshaled without love and respect. The specific issue in that congregation is meat that has been sacrificed in the rituals of pagan religions. So in some religious ceremony, a cow is slaughtered as a sacrifice to some god. Neptune or Apollo or Diana or Minerva. And the cow that was slaughtered is then sold in the marketplace. Perhaps for a discount. Steak, chuck roast, tri-tip, tenderloin, oxtails, ribs. So you can buy that meat and eat it. Maybe it’s even given to you for free. It was sacrificed to, let’s say, Apollo the sun god. And now it could be your dinner. And some people in the congregation are saying, “*No, you can’t eat that food. It’s tainted.*” And the other people in the congregation are saying, “*Sure, we can eat it.*” “*There is no Apollo. Those are only idols.*” “*And idols are not real.*” “*We know this. We have knowledge.*” “*So that means more chuck roast for us.*”

The conservatives are saying you can’t eat that meat. It’s dishonorable, it’s disrespectful, it’s potentially damning. And you have the liberals saying, “*Nonsense. Don’t be stupid. It’s just chuck roast.*” Paul is speaking to this particular conflict— among several others in this congregation in Corinth. And Paul, who IS a liberal, is siding with the conservatives. He is a man who believes that there is nothing innately wrong with that chuck roast. But what’s worse than eating or not eating the chuck roast is the way that the liberal faction is using slogans— facts— to *not* engage, to *not* respect, to *not* honor the viewpoint of the others: *That* is living and acting without love. You can have knowledge. But you can also have knowledge without love. That’s the problem. You can have the facts on your side. But if you’re not engaging with love then you’re failing, as far as Paul is concerned.

So Paul writes in our reading today: *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* Knowing things can make you arrogant. But love builds up. Paul has this whole line of thought running through First Corinthians with the verb *build*. He uses it at least fifteen times. It’s always used positively. You build up others. And you build up the church. The King James version uses the classic and formidable English word *edify*. Christians should be doing things that are *edifying*. They build up. The Greek verb is build a house, *oikodomeo*. When you approach another person, you build them up. When you look at community— particularly the church— you build it up. That is the work of the Christian. *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

Paul is really, really good at this. He writes: *Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.* That is an insight worth tweeting. In a time when social media makes these kinds of Corinthian slogans epidemic so that we can talk past one another with our slogans— in a time like this, Paul’s words would be worth a tweet or a Facebook post. *Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.* That’s dense with wisdom. If you’re talking about how much you know, then you don’t have the necessary knowledge. In my words, personally, I call that knowledge without wisdom. It’s knowledge, but it’s not the necessary knowledge. Especially if you’re foaming at the mouth. And then the

cherry on the sundae: *Anyone who loves God is known by him.* You do the loving. God will do the knowing. Brilliant.

I'm more and more convinced that Paul is the messenger for our time, for our society. On Reformation Sunday last fall, I preached the longest sermon of my career, twenty-five and a half minutes, on Paul's words: *Abound in this grace also. Excel also in this generous undertaking.* Also words to Corinth— that time, Second Corinthians. Grace meaning *magnanimity* toward others. Not just salvation for me. But a gracious disposition toward others.

And I know that is what he is advocating here in First Corinthians with the instruction that love builds up. Knowledge only puffs up. But love builds up. And whenever he say "build," Paul means building up others. And building up community. That's the work of love. In our society, the United States and elsewhere, we are undermining and tearing down. Trying to tear down other people. Trying to tear down our institutions. Trying to tear down precedent and custom. And every time a tear down takes place, it's because someone with knowledge claims that they are doing it rightly and righteously.

So I don't know who will be in Superbowl 53. Probably the Patriots. But on that Sunday, someone will stand in this pulpit and read these words from Paul: *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.* Powers and knowledge and even faith, yes even faith: you can have them all. But without the exercise of love those things make you nothing. Nothing. Without love, the road is nihilism. Your appetites— Paul warned in Galatians— your appetites will cause you to devour one another. Knowledge puffs up. But love builds up. Let's you and I be builders. Amen.