

Lectionary 4 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 31, 2021

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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

Dear Friends:

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Paul’s expression for us today in our second reading, First Corinthians. On a Sunday like this one, the first reading is supposed to complement the gospel. There’s supposedly a connection between the first reading and the gospel. But the second readings, on green Sundays— ordinary Sundays— the second readings are just sequential readings from one of the letters. With no intentional connection to the other readings. The letter called First Corinthians is butchered most unhelpfully, getting slotted into Epiphany each winter, so it is spread out over three years and very likely to be severely clipped, especially in years like this one, when Lent arrives early.

First Corinthians is sort of a tricky book, and yet it is also pretty simple. First Corinthians is one of Paul’s angry letters. He is upset with the congregation that he is writing to. This is the case with Corinthians and even more so with Galatians. He’s kind and loving with Philippians and Thessalonians, and respectful and thoughtful with Romans. But here in First Corinthians, the people have been acting badly. Paul is reprimanding them. It’s a chastising letter. And in a couple of places, it has verses that seem to be hostile to all human sexuality, homosexuality in particular, and verses that seem to be chauvinistic toward women. So it’s a somewhat unattractive piece of scripture all around. And the church year’s lectionary hacks it up and tosses it out to Christians like slop being thrown to pigs for them to forage. (Why don’t you tell us what you really think, Pastor Steve?) So all in all, First Corinthians gets bad treatment and bad publicity.

Which bothers me, because even if Paul was what we would call a prude, First Corinthians is probably the book of the Bible that has the most to say to American Christians and to American spirituality and to American culture. And one of the things this letter has to say is *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

That expression speaks to a particular situation that I would call scandalous behavior. An action that some people think is wrong, even though you know it is not wrong. The particular situation is something that we can’t relate to. It was food sacrificed to other gods. A lot of religions practiced animal sacrifice, and the leftover meat would be sold at a discount. And so if you are a Jew or a Christian, those gods are fictitious anyway. So why not take advantage and get some filete mignon for a very good price? But some of your fellow Christians might have just converted from the religion that sacrificed those animals, and it might just be a public

demonstration of Christian disrespect for other people's beliefs. And so some of the Christians in Corinth are saying, "Who cares?" "We *know* those other gods are not real." "We *know* that the beef cutlets do not belong to living gods." "We *know*. We have knowledge."

For his part, Paul is saying, "Don't eat the meat." Even if you know it's okay, if your behavior pushes someone away from Christ Jesus, if your behavior is a burden to others, then think about those other people. Put *their* spiritual well-being ahead of *your* own desire to get beef ribs at a bargain price. For Paul, love means putting someone else ahead of yourself, with an end in view. With a purpose. Love has a purpose. Love builds up.

First Corinthians tries to rally a bunch of pretty self-centered people and groups into a community shaped by Christ. Getting people to move from individualism to community, getting people to transition from selfishness to selflessness, getting people to be less about ego and more about service. This is what I mean when I say First Corinthians is the letter for now. For Americans. For American spirituality. For Americans who call themselves Christians: First Corinthians is the most relevant book of the New Testament.

The people that Paul is writing to just seem incredibly immature. When they come to the Lord's Supper, they divide up into groups, and they don't share food. Some people think that because they speak in tongues, they are superior to everyone else. Some people think that because they are justified by grace alone, then they can act like jerks. Some people that they have the right teachings, and therefore they are better than others. A lot of vanity. A lot of needy, thirsty egos. A lot of self-indulgence. A lot of people thinking about themselves, and not the community. And a lot of them are using Christian words and Christian ideas to bolster their sense of superiority. In Second Corinthians, Paul will talk about "super apostles." People who want to out-God everyone else.

First Corinthians is the same letter of the Bible where Paul says, "*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.*" You can have great talents and great insights, and an angelic voice and even magical powers. But if those things are not nested in Christian love, then you are a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. You are a percussion instrument running amok, drawing attention to yourself. You're not playing with the orchestra.

First Corinthians is the same letter of the Bible where Paul says, "*As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'*" Many members, one body. The kidneys cannot exist without the heart. The hands cannot work without the eyes. First Corinthians is the same letter of the Bible where Paul says, *For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.* When he says that, he's not talking about the doctrine of transubstantiation. He's talking about the validity of others, and the cohesion and integrity of the community. If you don't understand yourself as part of this greater whole, then you should not be taking bread and wine.

So, First Corinthians is very much a persuasive case that community matters more than the individual ego. Others' well-being takes precedence over your personal proclivities. Love is at the heart of being a Christian. Not romantic love, but the love that forgives and foregoes and forbears. The love that means sometimes you set aside your personal agenda.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. These are two verbs that are dear to Paul, and he uses both of them with the churches that have disappointed him. The Galatians. The Corinthians. Paul evidently knew about baking bread. Yeast causes dough to rise. I know, and you know, that we want bread to rise. So I take great care with my yeast, to let it thrive and make my bread dough rise. But in ancient times, yeast was also your foe. It could get into flour, it could get into dough, and cause it to ferment prematurely, and ruin it. Paul has this visual image of puffy dough. If you've ever punched down a batch of bread dough, you know how all that air sounds when it gets forced out. Paul is talking about egos, and he uses a sourdough metaphor for egos. They get puffed up. Don't you and I talk about having a big head? Paul is using this notion of bad sourdough— of unwanted sourdough— causing human egos to swell up in the wrong way. Big egos, big heads, boastfulness— this is being puffed up. And in today's part of First Corinthians, it's knowledge that puffs up.

Love on the other hand, *builds up*. And this is one of Paul's other verbs. It's a construction verb. And he uses it a lot. To talk about building up others— encouraging them, consoling them, guiding them, correcting them. And he talks about building up the church. Which doesn't mean evangelism or going to Home Depot. It means creating community. I'd say Paul uses that verb about twenty times in that way. Love does not mean that you always put others ahead of yourself. But it means you sometimes put the good of others ahead of yourself for the purpose of building them up. Building *them* up. Or building up community.

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Easy to remember. Words of advice for the people of our own day and time. Liberals and conservatives, inside the church and outside the church, young and old. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Amen.