

MAY JESUS CHRIST BE PRAISED!

January 29, 2012

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

I hated to see Toby coming down our street on his bike. You see, Toby was a troublemaker. And his father...well, his father beat Toby daily for no good reason. Toby always had bruises. Sometimes he had broken bones, and he even had brain damage from those beatings. Today we would know that what was happening to Toby at home was child abuse, but all we knew then was that Toby's dad was mean, and he made Toby mean.

Now Toby had a crush; he had a crush on the daughter of the pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ, and the parsonage for that church was on our block. So Toby came down our street every day. Toby wanted to see his sweetheart, but he also wanted to impress her father the pastor. So Toby would tell him...all the time he would tell him how much he liked Jesus. And then one day he added: ***I especially like his long, brown hair.*** Well, with his patience worn thin by Toby's persistence, the pastor looked at Toby and he said: ***You know, Toby, Jesus didn't have long, brown hair. Jesus was bald!***

With that, Toby burst into tears. He jumped on his bike, and he headed home. And we didn't see him again for weeks.

Now, folks, the truth is that we don't know what Jesus looked like. What we do know is that He was a first century Jew. We don't know what He looked like, but we do know that He did not look like the long-haired, fair-skinned Jesus of popular art. It's a great picture, but not very accurate. The truth is, Jesus could have been bald!

But that was too much for Toby. Toby's simple faith, you see, was all locked up in an artist's romantic image of Jesus. And, that day, that pastor shattered Toby's image, and he broke the tender heart of this tough, trouble-making kid.

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The Apostle Paul did not write those words for Toby. He wrote those words for the church in Corinth. Now you have to remember that the city of Corinth was prosperous, it was cultured, it was educated, it was cosmopolitan, and it was punctuated with a whole host of pagan temples and shrines. In such a place you'd think the church would thrive, but the truth is that the church in Corinth was deeply troubled. That church, that Corinthian Church, was cursed by competition and conflict. In that church there were constant battles between factions. In that church, there were cat fights: cat fights over superiority, no matter whether superiority was measured by knowledge, or by talents, or by generosity, or by commitment, or by devotion.

Today in this particular passage, Paul's focus is on the Freedom Faction. That Freedom Faction in the Church of Corinth believed that Christ has set us free from the law, and that that means we can do whatever we want. And so that's what the Freedom Faction was about. They were doing whatever they wanted to do and, in doing that, they demonstrated a smug defiance of tradition.

Now today, the particular problem for the Freedom Faction is meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Remember, there are lots of temples in Corinth, so there is a lot of meat available that's been sacrificed to idols, and that meat was good meat, and it was cheap. At the Zeus Meat Market, you got the best cut of steak you could buy in town!

The Freedom Faction knew that idols are not real, so they went down to the temple meat market and they said: ***Let's have a barbecue!*** But there were others who didn't understand that. There were others for whom eating that meat that had been sacrificed to an idol was idol worship, pure and simple. And so, when those people saw the Freedom Faction eating meat sacrificed to idols, their faith was destroyed. Paul's message to that Freedom Faction...and to every faction in Corinth that knew that they knew better...was this:

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The Apostle Paul was saying to those Christians in Corinth that the Christian faith is not about what we know...it's about how our loving God knows us, and how we know one another in love. It's not about how we fill our heads...it's about how we empty our hearts. It's not about the pride of making myself superior at the expense of others...it's about the humility of lifting others up in the dignity of love. You see, knowledge points to me, but love points to others and to God.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

That phrase – those seven words – captures the theme of Paul's message to the church at Corinth. That church in Corinth had lost its focus, it had lost its purpose, and it had lost its way. It was stuck. It was stuck in a conflict among factions that was fueled by suspicions. And so the Apostle Paul addresses the conflict. He addresses the factions. And, in this passage, the issue is eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Back in Chapter 3, it wasn't idol meat that was the issue for Paul. It was, ***Who is your favorite pastor? Is it Apollos or is it me?*** Listen to what Paul says back in Chapter 3.

For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

And then Paul says:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

In Chapter 13 Paul goes at this issue again. This time the issue is not meat and it's not your favorite pastor. The issue is our talents, and gifts, and abilities. That's why Paul writes these words that we love so much:

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. And 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. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Remember: *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

The Corinthian Church, as gifted as it was, had lost its focus, it had lost its purpose, and it had lost its way. It was stuck in the conflict of factions fueled by suspicion.

How about Union Church? How about this congregation? How about us? How are we similar to and different from that church...that ancient church in Corinth? How clear is *our* focus, how clear is *our* purpose, how clear is *our* way? And how stuck are *we* in the conflict of factions fueled by suspicion?

It's not so long ago that we concluded the celebration of our hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary. And, in remembering our history on that anniversary, we discovered that some of that history is laughable and some of our history is tragic. But, most important, some of our history – and perhaps the great majority of our history – is profound.

We have celebrated a hundred and seventy-five years. So, what do we do next? I think that the benediction on this anniversary celebration can be found (and I pray will be found) in our Purpose Discernment process. That process is really about taking our focus that is on where we've been and turning it toward where we're going. That's what Tony Robinson's visit with us at the end of October last year was all about: to help us to do that...to help us clarify our focus, our purpose and our way. It was a great time, a significant time, with Tony.

And then, not many days after Tony's visit with us...his time among us, Peggy Feyen resigned. And Peggy's resignation surfaced suspicions, and it created factions, and made for conflict in this congregation. Strong emotions were expressed and some are still being expressed; among them, anger. I have to say to you that these past three months (and it's been almost three months) have been the most difficult three months in my ministry. But that's not true just for me. It's been a difficult time for many of us, especially for our church leaders, and most especially for our Moderator, Barbara McClure-Lukens. Some have wondered what the leadership is up to and where we're going. Some have wondered if I am the right pastor or if I shouldn't be replaced. It sounds like Corinth, doesn't it? Is it Apollos we need, or is it Paul, or is it someone else?

Friends, nothing could emphasize more the importance of the purpose discernment process. You see, when we aren't clear about who we are and where we're going, then we're vulnerable; we're vulnerable to division, and to factions, and to conflict.

The Apostle Paul said this to the church at Corinth in the third chapter. He said:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

In the thirteenth chapter, the Apostle Paul said:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

And for the Apostle Paul, the word love is synonymous with the person of Christ Jesus. Or, most simply in Chapter 8 to those who wanted to eat meat, the Apostle Paul wrote:

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The Apostle Paul is absolutely crystal clear: the focus, the purpose and the way for both Christians and the church is love...holy love...self-sacrificing love...love that is made complete for us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

René Descartes has been called the Father of Modern Philosophy; a 17th century French philosopher whose most famous words are these: ***Cogito ergo sum – I think, therefore I am.*** That phrase is the motto of the enlightenment. ***I think, therefore I am.*** It says that knowledge is the highest good and the greatest goal.

But William Sloane Coffin, chaplain of Yale University and pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City said no. René Descartes was wrong. The motto of the life of faith is this: ***Amo ergo sum – I love, therefore I am.*** This is the motto of a living faith where love is the highest good and the greatest goal; love whose name for us is Jesus!

Tony Robinson taught us last fall that the church has served many purposes in culture and that we have lived for almost two thousand years in Christendom. Since Constantine, we have lived with a symbiotic relationship in the West between the church and society. The church had a role to fill in society, and society had great respect and reverence for the church. But, as Tony Robinson teaches, Christendom is coming to an end. The church and society's relationship is being severed, and the church as we know it is in transition...and yes, it is even in decline. For many of those years the church served many purposes, some of them including being a social club or a benevolent society. I believe that the question for us in these days at the end of Christendom is this: ***Are we passive members of a dying organization or are we active disciples of a living Lord?*** Discipleship is a word that simply means following the One who is love by living His love each day, every step of the way...or, as we'll sing it in just a moment: ***O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee.***

Yes, ***Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.***

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus confronts a man with an unclean spirit. Jesus is in a battle for the soul of this man. And Jesus casts out the unclean spirit and then, in its place, the Spirit of God rushes in to this man's heart and life.

For us, I think, the crucial issue is not the soul of this man with the unclean spirit but the soul of the church. What will it be? What will be our focus, our purpose, and our way? Will it be the multiple factions of our own knowledge and opinions or persuasions...or will it be God's flesh and blood love. Will it be Jesus Christ our Lord? I love the anthem that the choir sang today...

and you told them with your applause that you love it, too. We love that anthem. But do we believe it...do we believe that ***He Never Failed Us Yet!***

The altar window that stands at the center of this worship space is all about Jesus. The victorious, resurrected Jesus stands at the center. The medallions around him are scenes from His life. Every time we walk in this room, that window has the potential to lift our eyes, our hearts and our minds to Christ Jesus our Lord. Does it do that? Does it lift our vision to Jesus, or does it just simply cast a rainbow glow over our human differences, our opinions, and our factions?

In a little while at our Annual Meeting, we will have a chance to vote on a proposal to add a cross to the east gable of this church above the front door. In this room, the altar window points to Jesus. The cross would point to Jesus and give this church that same focus on the outside. In these days when Christendom is done, that cross could be a crucial reminder of who and whose we are: not only to us, but to everyone who sees this church.

Why should we have a cross? The ***message*** of the cross, you see, is that Jesus would rather die than stop loving us. The ***challenge*** of the cross is to make Jesus' love our purpose, and our focus, and our way. And the ***promise*** of the cross is that this congregation is alive when we ***serve*** Jesus, when we ***love*** Jesus, when we ***teach*** Jesus, when we ***follow*** Jesus, and when we ***praise*** Jesus, ***together*** – ***each*** one, ***every*** one, ***all*** of God's children: no asterisks...no footnotes...no exclusions.

As the banner on our building says it so well: ***No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here!*** Friends, if those words are true, if those words describe us, then it's not because we possess a superior knowledge. It's because we're committed to God's surpassing love. They're true when we're disciples of Jesus.

Remember, ***Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.***

I think that Union Church is at a crossroads. What path will we choose? Which way will we go? Will our journey be backwards into our history, or forward into ministry? As we decide...as we set a course...I can't offer you a roadmap. But I can offer you a Guide. And I can promise you that we will move forward into our future with new purpose, and new focus, and new resolve if we trust Him...if we are disciples of our Master...if we follow Jesus Christ our Lord.

Dear disciples, in everything that we think, and everything that we speak, and in everything that we do, let this always be our prayer: ***May Jesus Christ be praised!*** Amen.

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