

**LOVE NOT ARROGANCE**  
*Knowledge Puffs Up but Love Builds Up*  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Do you like to try to win arguments? Do you enjoy the delicious certainty that you are right and that other idiot taking the opposing point of view is dead wrong? I certainly do. I suppose its human nature. We sure are seeing that level of certainty and arrogance throughout the political debates and posturing as this country gears up for the presidential election this November.

The Apostle Paul had something to say about that in today's Epistle lesson. He developed a very important ethical principle, but it is couched in an issue that holds none of the fervor and emotion for us today that it held for Christians back in 50 AD. Should Christians be allowed to eat meat that had come from a pagan sacrifice? For Christians living in thoroughly pagan Corinth that was a tough question. Unless you were Jewish, and a Kosher butcher was available (doubtful), the only meat coming to market was from those animals that had been sacrificed upon the altars of Aphrodite and Zeus and a hundred other deities. Would eating this meat acknowledge belief in those pagan deities?

Paul begins by agreeing completely with those who felt that eating such meat was perfectly fine. We know that there is only one God. We know that a pagan sacrifice to a false idol doesn't change our perspective on the food. If we buy it in the marketplace and take it home and eat it, it does us no harm. The same is true if we are a guest in someone else's home, eating meat that came originally from an offering to a so-called god doesn't change our perspective. *It's just food.* There is absolutely no problem with eating the meat. However, Paul goes on, if eating that meat causes someone else (perhaps a new Christian or a seeker interested in the Christian faith) who believes that by eating the meat sacrificed to an idol that we in some way join in communion with that deity, then **don't eat it.** It is not our superior knowledge that is important but rather supporting one another that is important. Paul's first line in 8:1 gives us the principle: *Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.*

Our knowledge is like this balloon. It's a flimsy, inconsequential thing. But it looks impressive when we fill it with hot air. (blow up the balloon) *Knowledge puffs up.* It makes us feel important, special, *in the know.*

Love, on the other hand, builds up. How does love build up? By emptying itself (let balloon go fly around the room), by giving way to others, and by placing other's concerns and needs above my own. Love is what Jesus shows us upon the cross where he willingly offered himself for us and the whole world. Paul goes on a little later in his letter to describe what that love is like (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

*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. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

I really like the way those same words are translated in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase version of the Bible, *The Message*:

*Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.*

Paul's argument is based on the Christian version of the Shema: *Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and mind.* This is the first great commandment, but Jesus taught us that another is like it. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* Love of God and love of neighbor are intimately linked. The love of God who is one, would seem to allow Christians in their freedom to eat meat sacrificed to a so-called god because in fact there is no other God but Yahweh. But the second great commandment reminds us that to hurt our neighbor – and in this case more than a neighbor, our brothers and sisters who are part of our family in Christ – (to hurt our neighbor) is to deny our very love of God. Therefore Paul concludes that if his eating meat might cause some member of his Christian family to stumble then he would never eat meat forever.

Next Sunday I am going to be reflecting on Christian healing and recovery from addiction through the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. It strikes me that the Episcopal and our parish's Church's policy about alcohol is a good example of Paul's ethic of love trumping superior knowledge. Should alcohol be allowed at parish events and functions? Well, yes; there is nothing inherently wrong with alcohol. Jesus turned water into wine. He was even accused of eating and drinking too readily. But what about those for whom alcohol is not life giving but life destroying? What about children who are not mature enough to be responsible? One Easter Sunday at the lovely breakfast given between services for parishioners in my former parish the hospitality leaders decided to offer Mimosas with orange juice and champagne. That might have been OK but the drink wasn't labeled and no clear alternative was offered. The Mimosas were only handed out to adults, but one beloved elderly member who had been in recovery for many years wound up at an alcohol rehabilitation center because that drink started her back to drinking. The loving thing to do that builds up the body of Christ is to use extreme caution with anything that might bring harm. And so alcohol may only be offered at social functions where it is clearly labeled and equally attractive alternative beverages are offered. It shouldn't be offered at events frequented by children. When we offer the common cup *of wine* at Communion, those in recovery are encouraged to receive Christ only through receiving bread or to dip the host in wine rather than sipping from the cup.

What about us as individuals; how can we apply this Christian ethic? How can we be loving, gracious and supportive of those whose scruples differ from our own? Well, who are those people whose scruples differ from yours? Think of the sort of Christian, what approach to Christianity makes you angry. Who do you think of, what face pops in your mind's eye when you think of "*those hypocrites*?" How can we be loving, gracious and supportive of exactly those people in our Christian family *with whom we most disagree*

(those we are most certain lack our superior knowledge)? Let me offer three simple rules for lovingly building people up.

Loving behavior begins with 1) *a decision not to be selfish*. In a Bible study or small group discussion or at a board meeting, refrain from being the person who feels compelled to offer the insight that is the most clever, the most theologically astute, biblically pure or emotionally gripping. The life of the church is not about you or me; it's about God and neighbor. Offer only those thoughts that are going to nourish your neighbor and build up the body of Christ.

Then 2) make *the choice never to be obnoxious*, or at least try never to be. In the life of the church, we're going to encounter a wide range of people who have positions different from our own on Biblical authority, politics, parenting, marriage, money management, nutrition, recreation, education, vocation and human sexuality. Talk with them, respect them, and learn from them. Don't provoke them.

Finally, when you come together with your fellow Christians, remember that *everyone is a sinner for whom Christ died – including you*. 1) Decide not to be selfish, 2) make the choice to the best of your ability never to be obnoxious, and 3) remember that everyone is a sinner for whom Christ died, including you. (Ideas on 3 rules of Christian behavior taken from *Homiletics*, January, 2012, pgs. 39-40).

The good news is that we can love because we are loved. We can let some of that hot air out of our own balloons because God emptied God's self of power and majesty in order to be born among us, a tiny helpless baby for whom there was no room in the Inn. We can put others first because God has put us first. Because Jesus shows us the way and because his life flows through us we can dare to love as He loved. We can risk letting go of our own self importance and emptying ourselves to love one another and build his Church.

Remember that knowledge puffs up and no matter how much we *know* or think we know we can choose to follow Christ in lovingly building up one another and building up Christ's Church.