

ALL PUFFED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Before I ever got hired at a church, a wise mentor told me, “If you want to know what a church is all about, look at the documents it produces.

Look at minutes of committees, congregational meetings, annual meetings (which we just had on Thursday). You can learn a lot from a church by reading its reports.”

The documents a church produces tell you a lot about the church don't they? Do they struggle to meet their budget? Are there persistent disputes over long periods of time? Do some voices consistently drown out others? Are there issues that seem to animate a given church more than others? How do they make decisions? What do they do when they disagree?

The documents a church produces give you a window into the unique flavour and character of an individual church.

We don't have AGM reports from the first century, but we do have letters—many of them from the pen of the Apostle Paul.

In reading his correspondence to real Christians in places like Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Rome, and others, we see what these churches were struggling with, what they were joyful about, what they were hopeful for. We see what animated them, what dragged them down.

And we see how they dealt with differences of opinion. To back up even one more step, we see that they most certainly *had* differences of opinion regarding what faithfulness to Christ in the first century world required.

The early church was not some kind of utopia where because they were so close to the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, there was wonderful unanimity on all matters,

where everyone automatically pulled in the same direction, where their relationships with each other were always tranquil, selfless, and loving.

In each of Paul's letters (and other letters in the NT), we get a glimpse into the inner workings of specific people in specific places and times. We get a chance to observe how they made decisions, what issues were front and center for them, how they decided upon priorities, and, perhaps most importantly, how they discerned the will of God in the midst of competing visions, goals, and convictions.

Our text from 1 Corinthians 8 is a perfect example of this.

For the community in Corinth, one of the big issues of the day was what to do about food sacrificed to idols.

Animal sacrifice was not just a Jewish ritual. There were numerous temples throughout the first century world, each devoted to different gods or goddesses (Apollo, Venus, etc.) or to the Roman emperor and members of his family.

People would come to these temples with animals and then, depending on the temple and the ritual, would often have some kind of a meal as part of their act of worship and devotion to the god.

But there was usually more meat than the worshippers could eat, and the leftover meat would either be shared with other worshippers hanging around the temple, or taken to the market where it would be sold.

For some of the first Christians, many of whom were from a Jewish background and had grown up reciting the *shema* every day—"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One..."—and who had the law given on Mt. Sinai which prohibited idolatry of any kind ("You shall have no other gods before me"), this presented a problem.

To buy this meat that had been offered to idols was to, in a sense participate in the practice of idolatry, even if it was one step removed. The meat was "contaminated" because of its initial involvement in pagan worship.

For some Christians in Corinth, their consciences simply would not permit the eating of this meat. It represented a betrayal of their God. It would be to return to the very practices that they had been delivered from once they chose to follow Jesus.

But there were other Christians in Corinth as well. There were others who said that they had been given special knowledge that Christians had permission to not only eat this buy and eat this meat but to even eat in the temples themselves, because they knew that there was only one God and that these other gods were no gods at all, that the practice of sacrificing meat to then was meaningless and had no effect upon Christian belief and practice.

These teachers often set themselves up as having moved *beyond* the hoi polloi who were still bound by their unenlightened superstitions about non-existent gods. They knew what was really going on. They knew the score.

Indeed, these teachers not only understood themselves as having knowledge that others did not; they frequently framed this knowledge of theirs as evidence of a more advanced spirituality.

So, for the church in Corinth, the issue was a live one. To eat or not to eat. That was the question.

And it was a *big* one.

Even though the issue of whether or not Christians could buy meat that was sacrificed to idols seems like a rather arcane and irrelevant dispute to our twenty-first century ears, it most certainly was *not* to theirs.

This issue would have cut right to the heart of who their understanding of who God was and what God wanted.

There could be no greater sin than to be a participant in idolatry, even if indirectly. Idolatry was a big, *big* deal to the first Christians, particularly those whose conscience, spirituality, and ethics had been formed in the Jewish world.

This question of whether or not buying meat was participating in idolatry would have made some of the current issues that Christians divide over pale in comparison.

It was about more than ethics, more than social norms, more than correct ritual observance...

It was about the breaking (or not) of the first commandment of Israel's God.

This was not like some minor disagreement about style of music in the church. This was *huge*. It would have been more like choosing a colour of paint or something! 😊

So, how does Paul deal with this?

It's interesting to note where Paul starts.

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. **2** Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. **3** But whoever loves God is known by God.

Paul begins not by addressing the question of idolatry itself, but with the deeper and bigger issues of **the nature of relationships in the church**.

“You claim to have knowledge,” Paul says. “Fine. What is this knowledge doing to you and to the community?”

“It's leading to you thinking more highly of yourselves than you ought to, thinking you know more than you do, thinking that you are better than those whose conscience does not permit them to eat this meat.”

“You're ‘puffed up,’ Paul says. “Because that's what knowledge does.”

We know this, don't we? As human beings, we are experts at using knowledge, insight, spirituality, and morality as ways of setting ourselves apart from the herd.

Even in the church, where we are supposed to know that the way of Christ is always *down* and not *up*, we still find it so easy to be “puffed up” by our “enlightened” understandings of what following Jesus *really* means, of what discipleship *really* looks like, of what the church *really* ought to look and sound like.

Read almost any Christian publication (particularly the letters section!) and you will see that this is true.

I have read countless articles and conversations from within our own Mennonite community that at times reveal precisely the attitude Paul is critiquing in this passage.

The issue of human sexuality is front and center in our collective consciousness right now, so let's look at this one.

Those on the more conservative or traditional side of the issue claim that they have insight and knowledge into what it means to read the bible faithfully and consistently.

Those on the more liberal side claim that they have knowledge about the redemptive trajectory set in motion by Jesus' life and ministry among the marginalized and rejected of society.

Both sides claim that they have knowledge. Both sides often present themselves as the ones who *really* know the score.

And, at times, both sides present the side they disagree with as being unfaithful to Jesus.

Knowledge puffs up. It always has.

But love *builds* up.

Love prioritizes the good of others, the health of the Christian community, over knowledge, even knowledge about vitally important issues.

This doesn't mean that we don't have strong convictions about important issues. We do, we will, we *must*.

Paul certainly does. In verses 4-6 Paul clearly indicates that he agrees with those who say that it's permissible to eat meat offered to idols. He agrees that meat offered to idols is really meat offered to nothing at all.

Paul agrees with those who say, "Go ahead and eat."

But Paul doesn't stop there. He knows that not everyone has his level of understanding. He knows that those who think differently than him could be negatively affected by his acting on what he is convinced is true.

He knows that even though he has knowledge, even though he has the "right answer" to the question, that this is secondary to his primary duty as a follower of Jesus, which is to the love of God and the love of neighbour.

Paul knows that he is part of a community and that he has obligations to the community that transcend his own knowledge.

Valerie Nicolet-Anderson puts it like this:

Paul does not establish this knowledge as something that is the ultimate criterion to decide how to behave. **Paul never conceives of the Christ believer as an independent individual who would take decisions that involve him or herself only.** Quite the contrary in fact. For Paul, the Christ believers are first and foremost involved in a community. They are enmeshed in a network of relationships that connect them to other Christ believers.¹

How seriously does Paul take this? Look at verses 11-12 where Paul talks about when acting according to our “enlightened” knowledge negatively affects those who do not yet share this knowledge:

So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:11-12).

You sin against Christ. That’s strong stuff. That’s a sobering warning—for the early church in Corinth, and for us, as we think about how we are living with competing understandings in our day.

I think that Paul’s teaching for the church in Corinth, and God’s word to his church at all times and all places, including our own, as a Mennonite Church in twenty-first century Canada, could be summarized in two points:

1. Loves takes precedence over knowledge
2. Community takes precedence over the individual

These are both countercultural practices in our highly individualistic world. But I am convinced that they are desperately necessary as the church continues to wrestle with issues and difficult questions that have the potential to pit us against one another.

The church has to be different from the world around us. We, as the church, must show a better way.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2340

Nothing could be easier than to separate ourselves based on how we think about controversial issues. We see this all the time in the world around us. As human beings, we tend to surround ourselves with people who think like us, act like us, whose politics run the same as our own, whose tastes are similar.

Regrettably, we see this in the church as well.

But we shouldn't.

The church should be the one place in the world where we see human beings committed to loving one another in costly ways, *even when—especially when!—they don't agree upon matters that could easily divide them.*

The title of this sermon is “All Puffed Up and Nowhere to Go.”

On one level, this was meant to be kind of a playful title. But there's a sense in which it is almost literally true.

When we, as followers of Jesus, are “all puffed up” by the knowledge that we think we possess, as Paul is accusing the teachers in Corinth of being, when our “knowledge” trumps the debt of love and care we owe to those in our community, we have nowhere else to go because we've reached the end.

And the end is ourselves.

We have an inflated sense of the importance of our own knowledge, which almost always comes along with a disdain for those who have not arrived at our lofty vantage point.

It is a fundamentally arrogant position that has no room for God or others.

Or for love.

Over the last few years, whenever the question of sexuality has come up in conversation, I have heard a familiar comment about how we are dealing with this at LMC: “We agree to disagree.”

This is good. It is certainly preferable to some of the alternatives out there!

But my hope and my prayer is that the *reason* that we can agree to disagree is not due simply to a preference to avoid conflict, but because we have decided upon a higher value than agreement: the selfless love that we are called by Christ to show for one another.

And, of course, we know that only a few chapters later, Paul will describe precisely what this “highest value” looks like. I read these words last week, but I suspect that we can never hear this call enough.

Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, does not boast... is not proud... does not dishonor others... is not self-seeking... is not easily angered... keeps no record of wrongs... does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth... always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres...

May God help us here in Lethbridge Mennonite Church, as well as in the broader Mennonite Church, to always be seeking to build one another up in this kind of love rather than walling ourselves off from one another based on whatever knowledge we might think we possess.

Amen.

