

1 Corinthians 8 Love Ahead of Knowledge
Mark 1:21-28
January 28, 2024

The gospel reading for the day comes from Mark, and involves the casting out of demons, who knew who Jesus was, and he silenced them. But it was the text from 1 Corinthians that caught my attention, and so it will be the focus for the day.

Those who take their faith seriously can inadvertently put a heavier emphasis on a doctrine or an ethical requirement, or maybe a ritual, than it deserves. They can fall into the temptation to treat the practices and beliefs of the Christian faith, as divine, rather than as vehicles pointing us to God.

For instance, one of the moral demands of the Christian faith is to be honest, to tell the truth. As a biblical foundation, I could begin with the 9th commandment which is, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." In the narrow sense, this means that when one is under oath, testifying in a legal proceeding of some kind, one should tell the truth, and certainly not falsely implicate anyone in a wrongdoing. There is, of course, a practical reason to be truthful under oath, and that is that lying under oath is a crime attached to a punishment.

In the broader sense, it can be held to apply more generally, that even when not under oath, God desires that we should be truthful, especially in our presentation of others to others, or maybe even in our

apprehension of others to ourselves. The idea of honesty is a highly regarded moral requirement.

You have heard, of course, the story of the boy who cried wolf? Thinking it funny, the boy disrupted everyone's day by a claim of an attack by wild dogs, only to admit later that it was a joke; and then later when he *really* was attacked by wolves, no one came to help because they all thought he was joking and did not want to be duped all over again. There is another practical reason for honesty, that if you desire credibility, a reputation for honesty goes a long way.

We have presently, in our setting, a similar phenomenon, called swatting. Someone calls in a false claim of some kind of disturbance, or attack, or criminal activity, causing the police to arrive at someone's house, or maybe even a SWAT team, hence the name, ready to engage lethal force, if necessary, in what turns out to be a completely benign situation.

This false claim is often made against judges who make unpopular decisions, or political opponents, or those who are considered enemies for some reason. There is a good argument that can be made for honesty as a practical matter. Regardless whether it is because of its rightness, or its practicality, one should always be honest.

In Ephesians, Paul speaks in the following terms, in an almost offhand comment,

“instead, *speaking the truth in love*, we will grow to become, in every respect, the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

I am sure nobody would disagree with the general idea that honesty is a highly regarded moral demand. But here it is qualified. “Speaking the truth in love,” means, as Frederick Buechner described it, to tell the truth with concern not only for the truth that is being told, but also for the people it is being told to,” and I might add and am sure that he would agree, with a concern for the people it is being told about. Telling the truth is governed by the rule of love.

The text in 1 Corinthians 8 sends the same kind of message. Though it is not about the topic of honesty, but Christian freedom, which means that the faithful have been liberated from a legalistic interpretation of the religious demands. In the case here, it had to do with former Pagans living in a society still very much influenced by various Pagan religions.

The general idea is that when someone is exercising their freedom, its impact on other people should be considered. One can only assume that when someone has been attached to a tradition all their lives and then experience faith in Christ, it would be difficult to continue in the doctrines and rituals of that former tradition even though one no longer considers them meaningful. We might even say that continuing in the former beliefs and practices, immersed in them as they were for a long time, may be for them a failure of faith. Paul writes;

“Now about food sacrificed to idols, we know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up (and one doesn’t get the idea that being puffed up is a good thing), but love builds up. The person who thinks he knows something, does not yet know as he ought to know. But the person who loves God is known by God.” Knowledge is governed by the rule of love.

Obviously, people in our corner of Christendom and in our time, are not really all that concerned about eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. The practice of Pagan religion is rare. Though I have read that it still happens, I have never actually seen it.

The Jewish objection against consuming pork, and other non kosher foods has long since become only a distant concern for most Christians. So we might have to think of other examples where Christian freedom is restrained by a concern for others. But the idea is clear, the first concern is for one another, and freedom is to be sacrificed for the well-being of others. We are not far away from the season of Lent, in which we will focus upon the life and ministry of Jesus, leading to the cross, *which is God, freely sacrificing in love*.

I have raised the issue of honesty, and it seems to me that it fits with the premise of the supremacy of love. Our cultural discourse has become harsh and filled with vitriol, often involving invectives and accusations flying every which way, with little concern for the truthfulness of the claim.

I have spoken of it before, and it is a concern, and an attempt to apply the lesson here given, of placing love ahead of knowledge, would help a great deal in private relationships as well as with the public conversation.

You may ask what this has to do with freedom. The practice of our freedom in Christ is also governed by the rule of love. I only mention hyperbolic speech because it is an election year and there is much of it flying around. By God's grace, we have been given a measure of freedom to act and to speak.

We can act and speak out of our convictions, what we believe, even if what we believe is wrong. Even if it is right. When we are unrestrained to the point of misrepresenting another person, their character, their values, it means they have not been accorded the "love that builds up," and when that happens, we misuse our freedom, and have misunderstood our knowledge.

The call to the love of neighbor is the highest calling, underneath the call to a relationship with God, and it stands above every other doctrine, or ritual, or moral or ethical demand. That is what Paul is teaching here.

So let us be aware of the freedom we share in Christ, and how we have been taught the place of divine love in our lives. It is the way we have been treated by God, let it be the way we treat other people. And all this to the glory of God, though Jesus Our Lord.

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