

KNOW GREATER LOVE
Sermon, January 31, 2021
Text: I Corinthians 8; I John 4:7-12

"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But the one who loves God is known by God." I Corinthians 8:1b-3

The J.B. Phillips paraphrase of the New Testament put it this way: *"We should remember that while knowledge may make a man look big, it is only love that can make him grow to his full stature."* Note that the contrast is between knowledge and love, not knowledge and ignorance. And as mentioned during the Time with the Children, if it is true God is the source of all knowledge (*and it is!*), if it is true Jesus is the Truth (*and it is!*), then the more we actually learn about real knowledge and truth, the more we learn about the Source of all knowledge and truth Himself.

As someone once expressed it:

*Ignorance does not know that it does not know.
True knowledge does not know, and knows that it does not know.*

To put it in the vernacular, the guy who's always sounding off, *"I can explain that; I know all about that;"* can be much of the time so ignorant that he doesn't know he doesn't know. The people who are really bright know they **do not** know everything. According to this adage, true knowledge does not know it all, and knows it; it's the dumb people who think they know everything. Smart people are smart enough to know they don't know; dumb people are so dumb they don't know they don't know. Another related adage: *"Knowledge is the process of passing from the unconscious state of ignorance to the conscious state of ignorance."* True knowledge is about humbly understanding just how much it is we do NOT know. In fact, it is often the ones who think they know it all who are the most divisive and, frankly, the most dangerous ... especially if they get into leadership.

A slightly different tack same general idea:

*There are those who don't know, and know that they don't know - they are ignorant, educate them.
There are those who know, and don't know that they know; they are asleep, awaken them.
There are those who know, and know that they know; they are leaders, follow them.
And there are those who don't know, and know that they know ... they are fools, ignore them.*

"There are those who don't know, and know they don't know -- they are ignorant, educate them." Actually, in keeping with the first quotation, *True knowledge does not know, and knows that it does not know ...* those who don't know and know they don't know are the ones that really know, and know that they don't know everything ... and they want to know, they want to learn, they want to increase their knowledge, they want to know what's right and wrong, good and evil, true and false ... in a word, they are teachable.

"There are those who know, and don't know that they know; they are asleep, awaken them." There are those ... perhaps the majority of people ... who really do know many things, who have so much common sense and innate knowledge about what is good and right and true and noble, but they lack confidence in, or awareness of, their knowledge ... especially when faced with the pressures of an increasingly secular world. So many of us need to be awakened to and affirmed in what we already really do instinctively know as human beings created in the image God. In the words of Samuel Johnson, people more frequently need to be *reminded* rather than *informed*.

"There are those who don't know, and know that they know -- they are fools, ignore them." This would include the arrogant, the proud, the "puffed up," the unteachable; those who think they know all there is to know, it's all about what *they* think and what *they've* experienced and what *they* feel. However, to be clear: in love, we really aren't to ignore them. We are called to love such people, to serve them, to pray for them ... but try not to let their obstinacy suck our energy dry. But again, the warning ... when the fools become leaders, we are in trouble.

"There are those who know, and know that they know; they are leaders, follow them." These are people of conviction and principle and integrity, men and women who *really* know are anything but arrogant; they know there is always more to know. And as Paul would affirm, the more one comes to know about God and the love of God, the more humble that person becomes. It is almost like coming into view in a lit vanity mirror: the closer one comes to the Light, the more one sees his blemishes and imperfections, and the more humbling the experience is. The one who loves God, who draws near to God, is the one whom God knows. As John would reiterate, we love because He first loved us. Such love builds us up. As we love God with all our minds, that's edifying, that's uplifting.

From Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism", one of his first major poems, written in 1709. *"A little learning is a dang'rous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, And drinking largely sobers us*

again. In Greek mythology, the Pierian spring was sacred to the Muses and something of a fountain of knowledge. Shallow draughts, or sips, from the spring of knowledge were intoxicating to the brain, leading to *(as intoxication does)* a false know-it-all-ness and/or sense of superiority or power, authority. However, unlike alcohol-induced intoxication, the cure for *this* intoxication is to keep on drinking! No one can drink enough from the Pierian spring; no one can ever know enough, no one can ever learn enough! We need to keep “drinking” to offset the negative effects of the intoxication that comes from shallow sips. There is always more to learn.

In past Church Officer Training classes, we've looked at the epistles to Timothy and Titus where Paul lists crucial characteristics or qualities of those who should be considered to hold office in the church; those qualities include being **teachable**. The best teachers and leaders in the church are those who genuinely love God and who know there is always more to learn, especially about God and His ways; there are always ways to improve, always ways to better serve others, and always more we can learn from others. In fact, the whole Presbyterian form of representative government is more or less designed to implement the classic Protestant tenet of the “priesthood of believers” ... that each one of us is called to the ministry, that each one of us has the living presence of Christ within and are each uniquely gifted by God's Spirit *(in short, everybody is an expert on something on which you are not!)*. As we discuss and debate with our unique God-given perspectives and gifts and insights, and then graciously hammer out solutions pooling our knowledge together via the representative legislative process, what we are doing is making every effort to discern and listen to the directive voice of Jesus Christ speaking through His collective Body, the uniquely gifted members of His church.

As bit of an aside, this is also a basic tenet and principle of representative government in a republic; laws are hammered out through the legislative process that comes out of the debate and collective wisdom of those we've legally chosen via the ballot to represent us. As I mentioned two weeks ago, I'm fearful free speech is recently and increasingly endangered in our country, civilized and principled debate seems to be becoming increasingly rare and that does not foster representative government in a republic such as ours. Dissenting voices are being banned, suppressed, censored, shut up and shut down. People who disagree are demonized, labeled dangerous, seditious, domestic terrorists. We are losing the ability to have a real, honest, principled and courteous debate between civilized people as well as in our legislative bodies. Dictates and edicts and executive orders that bypass legislator representatives of the people are not how a republic is designed to function. End of aside.

Paul would agree with Alexander Pope; a little knowledge is a dangerous thing; it can intoxicate and puff us up, making us think we are bigger and smarter than we actually are, and we become disdainful of others we think aren't as enlightened as we. There is always more to learn, especially when it comes to the love of God. Again, when we know a little we think we are more expert and knowledgeable than we actually are and we can *(and often do)* become disdainful of others we think aren't as enlightened as we, and again, that's just not helpful. Paul encountered people like that in the early church. Many of the recent converts to Christianity in Corinth had been worshipping idols, and part of their idol worship involved sacrificing animals to those idols. After these worship services they would feast on that food, which was a social event as well as a religious duty. Now that they are Christian, should they continue to patronize these feast events? *“Certainly,”* said the know-it-alls. *“After all, we know idols are an illusion. They aren't real. What harm could it do to just go ahead and dig in; enjoy the social aspect?”*

Many of the recent converts to Christianity in Corinth had been worshipping idols, and part of their idol worship involved sacrificing animals to those idols. After these worship services they would feast on that food. Now that they are Christian, should they continue to patronize these feast events? *“Certainly,”* said the know-it-alls. *“After all, we know idols aren't real. What harm could it do to just go ahead and dig in and enjoy; why waste the food?”* Well, Paul saw the possibility of a great deal of harm. What if a new believer, still insecure in his faith, saw other professing Christians eating food offered to idols and misunderstood, thinking these more experienced Christians were still practicing idol-worship while being ostensibly Christian so it must be OK to worship more than one God? That it was apparently OK to keep on worshipping the “gods” of the culture, to keep on with the practices and customs and ways of life as if nothing had changed? Then these newer believers could fall back into the old *(and often destructive)* lifestyles they just left. Paul says to the Christians in Corinth, *“Don't let your so-called knowledge cause you to be a stumbling block to others.”* If our knowledge causes disdain for others, if our knowledge causes us to not be concerned for others, if our knowledge causes us not to care if others misunderstand our motives, if our knowledge actually causes others to sin, then there's something lacking in our knowledge! It's shallow; drink deeper!

God gave us our good minds. And I think Paul would tell us that would mean the best use of our minds is to find ways to build up other people in love. Little people who think they are big people disdain those they think ignorant. We want to be genuine big people, people who KNOW GREATER LOVE, people who know and want to imitate a big and gracious God Who desires to build people up, Who wants to elevate them with His gracious love expressed through Jesus Christ our Lord.