

Sermon 1 February 2015
'The Knowledge of Love' 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Mark 1:21-28

Prayer: We offer our Praise to you, O God of all creation. We exist in you and through you. You are the ground of our being and source of all life. In and through your incarnate love, we learn what it means to be your people. Amen.

Our challenge to day is centred on 'the knowledge of love', because Paul wrote 1 Cor 1:8 "We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up..." So the inter-play is between knowledge / consequences **and how** Paul wants it to be contained by / defined by love. Of course Paul doesn't mean just any kind of love, he means YHWH God seen as Jesus, known as the Holy Spirit. Cv

How do **we know** love? Because God first loved us and because we are soooo Human, God had to send Jesus to tell us, and Jesus left the Holy Spirit to be with us, we can't manage love on our own! To know the Lord is to know love, and most of us would be happy to say learning about the Lord **is** a life long journey that some of us keep walking, sometimes we get to run with new discoveries, and sometimes we just crawling – but we keep going learning more and more each day! ->

Sometimes we are sad *because* someone close to us has chosen to sit, or been called home by the Lord; sometimes someone close to us chooses not to walk on the same path – faith or otherwise... *Because* my faith traditions have been shaped by reformed theology – I believe in the influence of the self-and the Lord to be a defining ingredient in choosing which path in life to take. I choose to live within a Christian community; to walk a faith path defined by the Bible; to keep learning about YHWH in Jesus through the Spirit. I am blessed to be joined in this choice by all of you....

We are a faith community that is rich and varied **and** we hold together knowing we are all different in the way we dress, speak, work, laugh and love... *And even* different in how we interpret the Bible and apply scripture in our lives, but we are one in Christ. *And* Paul would tell us we can do this **because** of the love of God in Jesus. He tells us that ^{*1} living in community requires a certain type of knowledge, a transformative love, revealed by God in Christ.

And Paul continues to teach us that it is a knowledge that challenges **all** other systems of knowledge, therefore, it is vital to the mission of the church because its foundation is so different to **all** other systems. Paul is *not* saying we should not seek knowledge – absolutely not! But it seems to me, he is trying really hard to convince humanity – beginning with the people in the Christian community of Corinth – that **knowledge is love** – and not power.

He doesn't mention power – but it is there, isn't it? Lying just under the skin of this dilemma Paul was offering guidance on for our people in Corinth. Were you powerful because you knew idol meat didn't matter? Just as the issue of power is lying under the skin of Mark's story of Jesus healing the man in the Synagogue – who has power? *Scholars* ^{*3} *tell us that* Mark is sandwiching this story of liberation, freedom, life for a man made unclean because he is held in bondage to evil, Mark sandwiches this **between** assertions of Jesus power and authority as a teacher of God. Jesus shared knowledge of God, increased what people knew about God, and did it powerfully and with authority!

And what Jesus taught / the knowledge gained from this story is that: Jesus power was ultimate, stronger than anything else. His authority was from God; he built people up – made them better people from knowing him... he was love in a person – love incarnate, 'Love' among us. And that love will confront all that would make us unclean, unfit for living 'right', it twists good, robs dignity, defiles beauty, destroys life... no matter where or when; in a synagogue or church or not! cV

Carefully placing to one side issues of reality of demon possession, evil personified... in this passage Jesus confronts the 'unclean' / evil – and is himself confronted and recognised by evil and overcomes. In the battle of words and for power Jesus finally and *actually* said to the man, ^{*5} "Shut up and come out of him." "Shut up" is *phimoo*, which is also the word Jesus uses to calm the storm in Mk 4:39! This causes a violent reaction from the unclean spirit because as the spirit left, it tore the man apart. But Jesus' power is stronger, which Mark makes clear by saying that the spirit "came out of him."

Healing over – Jesus returned to teaching with power and authority.... Is power defined as knowing the most, from the best? Maybe, maybe not but today Paul would say: not if your knowledge has no love.

In Corinthians, ^{*1} Paul is addressing a cultural norm that gives privilege and status to those who are educated and financially secure enough to buy meat. The norm of privileging the elite is a norm of the Roman Empire, which assumes a hierarchy of relationship based on rank within the imperial system.

Paul recognises this imperial norm of privileging the knowledge of the elite, runs counter to the collective witness of the church, which is governed by an altogether different type of knowledge. The well-off members who can afford to purchase meat from idols are apparently bringing meat dishes to the church potlucks. This creates tension and a conflict for those who not only are unable to afford this meat, but who also believe eating such meat undermines the gospel witness. ^{*2}We need to remember that much sacrifice in the ancient world had to do with communion with the god, by eating the meat of the sacrifice (echoes of Holy Communion). Paul could have tried to help them see it was nothing and they needn't worry, but he doesn't we can guess, because that isn't helpful for the people struggling with all this.

What he does is to agree with the theological reasoning of the educated members, knowing that, in Christ, we **are given** a new liberty and are therefore no longer constrained by imposed laws or false powers. Yet, Paul insists that this theological knowledge falls far short if it is uninformed by the knowledge of love. Remember he writes that 'knowledge without love "puffs up,..". Knowledge with love "builds up" (v. 1). ^{*2}To be with them means to take their situation into account. It is not a matter just of being right, but of doing the 'right thing', the caring thing, by them.

Paul is saying that love has to be informed and situational and this is an example of such. His teaching was never intended to become a general rule for every situation. Sometimes it is necessary to do things which will cause offence to some. Jesus would never have healed the man in Mark's Gospel reading today if he didn't want to offend people. So this writing of Paul's is not a general rule about avoiding upsetting people or we would never be able to make sense of Jesus, his life, teachings let alone his death!

So here Paul is offering a *contextual* ethic, this is one in which he says love, rather than any other system of knowledge, is how we are to live our lives. How we are to determine the ethics, morals, attitudes of our daily living. This is the putting of our faith on display for others to see, trust, and be invited to come and believe for themselves. This knowledge of love applies in the ever growing circles of our lives – from the intimate and deeply personal relationship we have with the Lord, to our families, **to** our faith communities from worship **to** after church chatting.^{*1} and **even** congregational meetings!!! How we live together shows what we know of love. Are we knowing love (God/ Lord) as we do, are we building each other up? OR??

Or – what? The challenge is that if we really and truly believe then we have no option but to accept that our knowledge of love forms the basis for a prophetic challenge to empires and all systems of knowledge that keep people in bondage – whether it is by domination, exclusion, or exploitation. **Our** knowledge of Love creates the probability that we will confront all that makes us – *humanity* unclean – inhabited by evil **in the name and power and with the authority of love**. **Our** knowledge of love creates the possibility that the most educated member of any congregation may be the one who by the World / Roman imperial standards is the least among us. **Can** we build each other up in the knowledge of love? Of course! ☺ And with our increasing knowledge of love we can do even **better!** Amen.

^{*1} Seasons MediaCom ^{*2} W Loader ^{*3} J Petty, WLoader, KMatthews... ^{*5} J Petty