

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a man who was sent by God into that land to preach and teach. He had been raised in a faithful household, educated in good schools, and had completed his preparations for the ordained ministry all in due course. The man loved God, and he loved God's people, and the time had come for the man to leave the safe surroundings of the seminary and the constant oversight of the professors and doctors of the church and venture into the world as God had called him to do.

One day, the man traveled from his home to another town nearby. He had been let to this town to bring the Word of God to the people there, for many had not heard it. With nervous anticipation, he entered into the place of worship and began to teach. The people were amazed at the message he brought to them. "Could it be that this is the one we have been seeking?" they asked one another. "Have we finally found the preacher we have been seeking for so long?" The man brought the people a message of God's plan for them, and they were astonished at the clarity of the message. Verily, verily, this is the one whom the people had been seeking, and the invited the man to stay with them and continue to teach them.

The man taught the people many things, but mostly, he taught them about the love God has for all people, regardless of their age, size, shape, gender, or color. The man taught the people that they were the ones chosen by God, and as God's chosen people, they were adopted into God's family by baptism and given a share of the inheritance the Father sets aside for all of His children. Sometimes, the man brought a message to the people that they enjoyed hearing and made them feel good about themselves, and they loved their teacher. Other times, the man brought them a message that made them feel uncomfortable because the Word of God they heard convicted them of their own sinfulness and disobedience—disobedience not to the teacher, but to God and God's will for the people. The man was a prophet sent from God, and he was filled with God's commands to give to the people, and the man wanted the people to hear God's commandments and live by them, so that the people would not be held accountable for disobeying God, and the teacher would not risk losing God's favor by not teaching as he was commanded.

The man worked very hard at being a good teacher and shepherd to the people to whom God had placed in his care. Like any young priest or prophet, the man made his mistakes, and even argued with God about the message he was being asked to deliver to the people. As the man struggled with himself and with God, there were people in the community who became distracted. Some people began to lose sight of what the teacher was teaching, and instead focused on the teacher himself. “We don’t like the messenger, so we will no longer listen to the message,” they began to say. “If the messenger will not leave us, we will leave this place, and we will withhold our tithes and offerings to God to spite the messenger.” Some of those who were unhappy began to say, “Come, we know better. We know how it is supposed to be done. Follow us.”

Word of discord in the community reached Paul, and he was not happy about it at all. He wrote to the factions in Corinth in order to bring order to the chaos. Paul took issue with those who claimed to know better. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him,”¹ wrote Paul. In other words, if you think you have it all figured out, you don’t.

In the case of the community at Corinth, the battle lines had been drawn over the eating of meat. Not just any meat, but the meat that had been sacrificed in the pagan temples to idols. Those who “knew it all” believed that it was OK to eat that sacrificed meat, because “everyone” knows that there are no idol really exists, and there is only one God, so what is going on in the pagan temple is simply nonsense. Those who were “puffed up” by knowledge were really just full of hot air.

You see, dear sisters and brothers, the reason these so-called knowledgeable men and women were really just gas bags was quite clear. They might have known the truth—that the food sacrificed to these idols was OK to eat—but in doing that, they were having a deadly impact on those in the community who weren’t as well-educated in the faith and didn’t have such a deep grasp of theology. These “weaker”

¹ 1 Corinthians 8:1b-3 (NRSV)

sisters and brothers, as Paul called them, were falling away from the faith that they were just learning because they were being confused by those who supposedly knew it all.

This creates a problem for Paul. Paul wants everyone to be sure in their faith, and not to doubt. That's why Paul really slams into those who claim to have "knowledge" about the faith and flaunt their so-called wisdom in front of those who are weaker in the faith. Food, works, and even preachers and teachers do not bring us any closer to God than we are when we are baptized. We are no better or worse off because of what we eat, drink, drive, or to whom we hear proclaiming God's Word.

But, do not get so smug, Paul tells the Corinthians. If your personal liberty makes a weaker or less knowledgeable brother or sister sin or lose faith, then you, o wise one, have not only sinned against your sister or brother, but you have sinned against Christ, and that is not acceptable.

We shouldn't be so smug, either. Just because we think we know it all doesn't mean we have to show how much we don't know. Each one of us is responsible to one another and to God. We are responsible to one another for the building up of wisdom and faith in the weak and the deepening of that wisdom and faith in the strong. We are responsible to God for making certain—darned certain—that we don't do anything or say anything that might cause a less-knowledgeable sister or brother to lose faith. Furthermore, we are responsible to God for living out our baptism daily, living lives that radiate God's love for us outward to all those with whom we come in contact.

Jesus taught in many places, and cured all sorts of people—Jews and Gentiles alike. He did so because that was his calling—to come into the world not to condemn it, but to save it, and in the process to save each and every one of us and every single person who hears the Good News and believes. We have much to learn, and we will never have full knowledge of the inheritance we have from God. But as the

psalmist writes, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.”²

Be wise. Love God. Love God’s people. Practice the fear of the Lord. It’s really good for your wisdom.

² Psalm 111:10 (NRSV)