

It's Not Enough To Know

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, February 8, 2009 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Just five years ago, Ken Jennings was an unknown computer geek and trivia buff in Salt Lake City, Utah, married with an infant son. Then, in 2004 he did something no one had ever done before – he went on the television game show Jeopardy! and won an incredible 74 consecutive games, earning over two and a half million dollars in prize money, and becoming an instant (and oddly enough, enduring) celebrity.

Ken is what we used to call a “walking encyclopedia” back when I was in junior high school. Of course, back then, being a “walking encyclopedia” didn't make you a celebrity or earn you millions. Instead, it made it likely that you were going to get shoved into your own locker and earned you “wedgies.” Believe me, I know. I was a smart kid, but as many people – including my older brothers – explained to me, “Nobody likes a know-it-all.”

Eventually I learned that there is nothing wrong with being smart, and really nothing wrong even with thinking – or knowing – that you are smart. You only get in trouble when you try to make everybody else think you are smart. It isn't the desire to do well that causes problems. It is the effort you make to prove you are better than others. Knowledge is a good thing. All else being equal, it is better to be smart than . . . not smart. But as Paul discovered in Corinth, being smart is not enough. The congregation that Paul had established in Corinth was vibrant and diverse. Corinth was a relatively new city within the Roman Empire and provided more opportunities for social and economic advancement than most cities at that time. So we should not be surprised that Corinth as a city attracted a lot of ambitious and highly competitive people. For several reasons we won't go into this morning, the church at Corinth developed factions. People who thought or lived or worshiped in certain ways came together and started to meet separately and think of themselves as superior to those who thought or lived or worshiped differently. This was not good for the church as a whole or for their mission to reach others in the name of Jesus Christ. Not only were there hurt feelings and resentment, but all the energy wasted on arguing over who knew the most or did the best was energy that wasn't available for reaching out to others, proclaiming the gospel or ministering to the needy. One of the “meatier” arguments that developed among the Christians in Corinth concerned the appropriateness of eating in the temple of an idol. “Why would a Christian do that?” you might ask. Well, in the ancient world at that time, the temples of idols also functioned as public gathering places for festive meals and as butcher shops from which meat could be purchased. The temples got much of their financial

support from selling left-over meat from sacrificial animals, after certain portions had been burnt on the altar. In fact, meat was hard to come by apart from temples. Many of the Christians in Corinth would regularly find themselves invited to feasts at the temples of idols by friends or family members who had not yet become Christians, or they might be served meat at a meal in a friend's house that had been purchased from a pagan temple.

Some Corinthian Christians (the know-it-alls) saw no problem with this. They thought about it this way – idols are not real. They are just pieces of wood, or metal, or stone. There is only one God, so idols don't even represent anything that is real. So what does it matter if other people think they are making a sacrifice to some god or goddess, if that god or goddess doesn't really exist? Nothing happens to the meat. It doesn't get "cooties." It is just meat. So, as long as we Christians give thanks to God, we can eat the meat without guilt or worries. Now, technically speaking, these know-it-alls were right. Idols were just wood, stone or metal. They did not represent real gods or goddesses. There was only one God, and that was the God the Christians worshiped. So the meat was fine. There was not a thing wrong with it. What the know-it-alls failed to grasp, however, was that while there was nothing wrong with the meat itself, there could be something wrong with eating it, especially in public. What Paul urged them to consider was what effect this could have on other Christians who might not have reached the same point of understanding or may not have fully accepted yet that idols were not real gods. If some of these other Christians saw their "know-it-all" brothers and sisters sitting in the open air courtyard of a pagan temple wolfing down a Zeus-burger or a Saturn-steak, they might be tempted to try it themselves. And because these on-looking Christians were less secure in their faith, they might not be able to stop at just enjoying a good meal. They might be drawn back into full participation in the worship of the idol, and drawn away from their faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Evidently, this was actually happening. Some of the believers the Apostle Paul described as "weak" were being tempted by seeing brothers and sisters eating meat sacrificed to idols and were being drawn back into idol worship. This, Paul declared, was not good. Of course, the "know-it-alls" said, "How is this our problem? It isn't our fault that these people are dumb. We know that idols aren't real. Why can't they figure it out?"

To which Paul replied, in essence, "It's not enough to know. Knowledge is swell, and you are right about this idol business. But it isn't what you know that makes you a good person. It is what is in your heart. It

is how well you treat others. It is how well you love that makes you a good person.”

It is too easy to look down on others, to blame them for all their problems, and to think if they would just think more or try harder they wouldn't have problems. But it isn't always that simple.

A dozen years ago in The Upper Room devotional, Nancy Eastridge wrote about a visit to a pet store. She said, “I laughed when I saw the parrot making a great fuss about getting from the perch to the ground. It seemed to be struggling so hard and so much in vain. ‘Funny bird,’ I said. ‘Why don't you just fly?’ Then the owner told me that the wings of parrots are clipped to keep them from flying away.

Eastridge continued, “I watched the parrot struggle – swinging from one foot, turning itself upside down, hanging on with its beak, and finally falling and lying dazed on the ground. Now there was no laughter in me, for the parrot had become a symbol. It was like all those people who appear to be free in our world, but who have had their wings clipped – by poverty, lack of education, discrimination, abuse, illness. And we stand on the sidelines and say, ‘Strange people! Why don't they act like the rest of us do?’ But as we say this, we show that we – who think we know so much – are ignorant of the pain, limitations and despair of those who, like the parrot, appear to be free, but cannot fly.”

The Apostle Paul wanted the confident Christians in Corinth to recognize that some of their brothers and sisters in the faith appeared to be free but could not “fly.” And Paul also wanted the confident Christians, the “know-it-alls,” to know that it was not enough to know:

“We know that ‘all of us possess knowledge,’ 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.”

It isn't knowledge, but love that really matters. Until we have learned that, we really haven't learned anything. Some years ago, in India, there was a famous guru giving a talk to thousands of people. In the crowd were holy men, presidents, film stars, musicians and many, many others. Apparently when this man talked, his voice was kind of “hypnotic” and people became entranced by his words.

When he had finished speaking, the guru asked if there were any further questions. There was a silence as people absorbed what they had just heard until a man stood up. He was a business type, a Western, skeptical man and half-laughing he said to the guru, “All right then, if you know everything, what's the meaning of life?”

The man was trying to embarrass the guru, to kind of belittle him. But, the guru answered, "I'll answer your question, but first let me tell you something about yourself." Now the man was the one that everyone was looking at and became uncomfortable.

"You have never been in love, have you? Real, deep, true love?"

"No," replied the man, now slightly embarrassed himself, "No, I haven't."

"Because ..." said the guru, "... a person who asks the question that you asked me, about the 'meaning of life', is really only telling you something about themselves. They have missed out on, or not experienced ... love. Basically, a person who knew real Love, from their own direct, personal experience, would never even be able to ask the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' because they would already know."

The Apostle Paul would have agreed with that. In fact, he said it in his own way, in the famous 13th chapter of the same letter to the Corinthians that we read from this morning:

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

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. . . . And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

It's not enough to know. You have to know how to love . . . as we are loved by the One who suffered and died for us, so we could see what love really is.

Amen.