



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church February 1, 2015

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

Many years ago, when I first had thoughts about entering the ministry, I was told by more than one person, "Don't go to college, they'll educate the faith out of you". A generation of modern, educated ministers had worked so hard to "correct" the child like faith of their congregations and impart "knowledge" about scripture, that they had alienated them. Instead of adding understanding to build a mature faith, they had set up a competition between knowledge and faith. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

In writing to his congregation in Corinth, Paul answers some questions they had about living the faith in a rough, multi-faith city. The issue they raised was about eating meat that had first been offered to one of the many idols in Corinth. This passage is often overlooked by preachers because they look at that issue and think, "This has no relevance to my congregation, there's no temple in the Vic market." But notice how quickly Paul moves from meat to knowledge. For Paul the issue isn't about meat, it's about community bonds, particularly the fundamental understanding of the community; we are not individuals gathered before God, we are the body of Christ, a community of love and respect. In the freedom of the Gospel we are not bound by laws and rules, but in the love of the Gospel we respect that others may not know that and so we govern our actions for their sake. Paul himself knew idols aren't real and there is no way a piece of meat that has been butchered in some ritual is going to cause spiritual harm, but he respected that others, new to the faith and still delicate in their understanding, may not know that. So he says, for their sake he will abstain from all meat. He will not let his knowledge threaten their faith; rather, in love, he will walk with them in their understanding. What looks like an issue of meat becomes an issue of love in the community.

So, what if we apply that concept to today's Gospel. There are many in today's churches, and represented in the commentaries, who apply their knowledge to this story and try to de-mythologise it. Of course there are no evil spirits or demons, that's an ancient superstition, this is probably an instance of some mental disorder, and Jesus quite rightly uses a strong, authoritarian voice and body language to bring the man under control. Or, this is clearly a political story by Mark to show that even though some people in the synagogue had an idea who Jesus was – the Holy One of God – they were dominated by fear and jealousy and rejected him. As interesting and important as these understandings

are, the “of course” and “clearly” become a rebuff to those who take the word as it is read. Those who see the spiritual conflict in this story and take heart that we follow one who has the authority to command the spirits. The Gospels are jewels, with many facets that are open to view the stories from different directions and understandings and there is no room for knowledge to force everyone to view them from the one direction. In love, we might open people up to new ways to view stories; ways that can add understanding to faith, not ways that threaten faith.

To read this story of the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue as an exorcism, a demonstration of the authority of Jesus over the spirits, leaves issues that modern theology is trying to work out. Why would such exorcisms cause controversy with the priests and Pharisees? There is a political dimension here. And, if this is Gospel, are we left with the understanding that all mental illness is due to unclean spirits? There is a rational dimension here. There is room for new understandings, but not at the expense of the faith of others. When Jesus was confronting the scribes and Pharisees about their understanding of the Messiah, he didn't arrogantly tell them they were wrong, he pointed out a limitation in their view. “If David calls the Messiah Lord, how can he be his son?” You are not wrong, you are close, just allow your faith to be fed by new understanding. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Knowledge is a good thing and faith needs understanding to grow but knowledge can also breed arrogance if it doesn't accept its own limitations and the rights of others to different knowledge and different understanding.

A few years ago, during the last American administration, then Vice President Donald Rumsfeld, opened himself to a bit a ridicule by clumsily talking about known knowns and known unknowns. He was trying to use an important metaphor about knowledge. Imagine a circle that represents all possible knowledge. Then draw a little pie slice that represents how much you know – the things you know that you know. Then draw beside it a pie slice to represent things you are aware of that you don't fully know about – the things you know that you don't know. All the rest of the circle is knowledge that is beyond your awareness – the things you don't even know that you don't know.

Paul was on to something similar when he wrote to the Corinthians, “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge”. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. And then Paul adds a little redirecting truth, “but anyone who loves God is known by God.” The real knowledge to consider and be concerned about is to be known by God.

This passage from Paul is about as modern and relevant as you can get- he even uses the word ‘rights’! Having introduced to idea of freedom in the Gospel of love through Jesus

Christ, he now has to deal with the consequences of that freedom and the possible damages of freedom to the community; “Take care that your liberty - your right to knowledge - is not a stumbling block to the weak”. Your rights are to be exercised in the law of love, both love of your fellow members of the community and love of God. He opened this teaching via an issue of meat sacrificed to idols, I’ve applied it to theological understanding, and we could just as easily discuss issues like the place of alcohol in the church, worship practices, hymn choices or use of money. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

We are called to community; indeed there are theologians who will say that salvation apart from community is not possible. We are called not just to gather, but to exercise love in and through the community. And so, as part of that, we are called to say, and live, the principle that, as important as individual rights are, they should not threaten anyone’s place or growth in the community. And definitely not threaten anyone’s place with God. Consideration and respect are far more important than a perceived knowledge. Yes, there are issues and understandings that are important for a mature faith in this time and place, but a mature faith should also have the love and patience to introduce those understandings in a respectful way. Knowledge can produce arrogance; love produces community.