

“My Way or the Highway?”  
I Corinthians 8:1-13  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
January 28, 2018  
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Let’s be honest. Sometimes we come to worship and look forward to the music. Isn’t Mary a wonderful organist? Isn’t the band wonderful? Aren’t Steven and Mary and the choir a blessing? Sometimes we look forward to the prayers. Isn’t it great to know that when we speak, God listens? And sometimes we look forward to sit still in the silence, the beauty of silence, the beauty of God’s presence.

But the scripture lessons . . . Sometimes they are tough to decipher. We listen to Ezekiel. He speaks of the mystery of a wheel within a wheel. We hear a lesson from Revelation. We become lost in the symbolism of horse and rider, of lampstand and measuring rod, of strange beasts and special numbers.

So we may despair when we listen to the first few words of this morning’s New Testament lesson. We may not know exactly where to find Corinth on a map. We may not be completely sure how to spell “Corinthians.” And I expect that almost all of us are puzzled how thinking about food sacrificed to false gods could have anything to do with us.

My brother, Jim, graduated from a small junior college, only about an hour or so from our home. It was a church-related school. The college motto in Latin was something like “Sapientia est melior rubicus.” “Wisdom is better than rubies.”

That line, from Proverbs 8:11, is a quick reminder that the church is all about wisdom and knowledge. We have education classes every Sunday for all ages. Young adolescents participate in a class to be confirmed as members. Elders and deacons experience officer training. Women’s circles and other small groups gather to study the Bible. Pastors have to demonstrate their skills through ordination exams on Bible, theology, worship and polity before beginning ministry.

Education and spiritual formation is at the heart of who we are and what we do.

But it’s possible to take this too far. Listen again to the opening of our lesson: “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Lesson number one: love is even better than knowledge. Yes, you may be wired 24/7, and all up-to-date on pop culture. “The Shape of Water” racked up thirteen Oscar nominations. A former Disney TV star has been charged with armed robbery in southern California. Grumpy Cat won \$ 700,000 in court for misappropriation of his image and identity. You may have worked hard for that masters or doctorate, or become an expert in your field through extensive job training. Knowledge is very important.

But knowledge is not the best measure of Christian maturity. If knowledge is better than jewels, then love is even better than knowledge.

The most important question is this: Are your smarts leading to ongoing spiritual growth? Do your study and personal reflection lead to growth in giving, forgiving, patience, kindness? Is your practice of the Christian life rooted in love of God and love of neighbor?

Lesson number two: understanding – what we would call “real wisdom” – is multi-leveled. True understanding requires not only knowledge, but also love. It requires not only conviction and passion, but the willingness for our convictions to change and deepen.

Spiritual maturity for example, demands our ability to hold important values in tension, together at the very same moment, not simply identifying one perspective and stating it clearly and loudly.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther wrote a book that changed the trajectory of the Christian faith. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther wrote, “A Christian is the most free person of all, subject

and subservient to none.” And then in the very next sentence, “A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, subject and subservient to everyone.”

This is multi-leveled understanding. This stance demands the maturity of holding fast to values as polarities. But it is a hard, hard way to go in a world in which each individual shouts his own particular truth as if nothing else matters.

That latter approach becomes deadly. It’s deadly when we stop agreeing that green means go and red means stop, and instead if we each think, “I’m in a hurry, and that’s most important. I’m going to drive through that intersection right now, no matter what!”

This richness and depth of genuine spiritual wisdom is what the apostle Paul references when he states two different aspects of truth in close succession. In verse five he says, “There are many false gods and many lords.” In verse four, just before that, he says, “No false god – that is, no idol – truly exists.”

Think about that for just a moment. They are statements at odds with one another. But they are both true at the same time. Our greed or lust or self-centered desires lead us to all kinds of gods that have power, real power, over our hearts. They are not actual gods. But oh, yes, they are real.

Here’s the rub. In a world that screams the importance of individual truth, personal truth, the power of one particular person’s story, we Christ followers are called to an important distinction. We are called not to stand up for what *I* believe, but to stand up for our neighbors, for their beliefs and well-being.

We are free, completely free. We are free to love others fiercely and with great devotion, making ourselves subject to everyone. We are free to give our time and resources to help the hungry and homeless of Sarasota, the forgotten of Puerto Rico (half still without power four months after the hurricanes), and those devastated by wildfires and mudslides in southern California. We are free to listen and love, to hear the voices of those long silenced, the voices of one young woman after another who has been denigrated and abused and molested.

Lesson number three: Don’t become a stumbling block to others. If you and I take advantage of our freedom in Christ to do what we want, we wound others. And we sin against God in Christ.

This is a tough one for us all. We fall into habits, daily habits, that point others in the wrong direction. This is true for us all, including and especially me. But exercising our prerogatives, using our personal power without considering our neighbors has real negative impact on the spiritual lives of others.

When they you see you and I cut a corner, cheat a workman, abuse a member of our family, giving into temptation, falling into the same routines and rhythms of our neighbors, they draw their own conclusions. Huh, they think. This is how pastors and elders and deacons and Presbyterians and Christians really live.

I hate to think about how many people have quit coming to churches, stopped striving for faith, given up on the spiritual life.

We Christians are human. We are just as human as anyone else. We fail each other in so many ways – dishonesty, infidelity, wrong business dealings, even abuse, even verbal and physical abuse. We need healing. We need to grow – in love and in understanding. We need to learn that we belong not to ourselves, but to God and our neighbors.

How do we put all this together? Lesson number one: love is better than knowledge. Lesson number two: real understanding, true wisdom, is multi-leveled. Lesson number three: Don’t be a stumbling block to others.

Let’s start with that last one and work backwards. It’s important for us to think about our neighbors, to truly consider them at length. How do our perspectives and actions affect our wife or husband, our mother or father, our sister or brother, our daughter or son, our neighbors down the street, our neighbors around the world? What are the easy, wrongheaded habits into which you and I have fallen, the habits that hurt others?

Next, how can we listen and learn much more about all these cherished ones - in our household and family, across the street, only a few homes or a few blocks away who struggle for meaningful work, with health concerns, with their need for a good education?

Finally, how can we further reorient our lives so that they focus not only on our opinions, our preferences, our habits, our wellbeing, but on the needs of those around us? Love grounded in insight is far better than knowledge alone.

Please remember the promise of the third verse of our I Corinthians lesson: "Anyone who loves God is known by God." If you love God, if you seek to love God, God knows your pain. God knows the ways you and I have hurt others. God knows the ways you and I have been hurt by others.

God plumbs the depths of all our wounds. The Lord loves us here, right here, right where we are, as we grow toward healing and peace.

Years ago, a dear friend gave me a well-known prayer, a prayer by Catholic monk Thomas Merton, a prayer that has comforted me, especially when I am uncertain of my direction. "My Lord God," Merton prayed, "I have no idea where I am going. I cannot see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

"But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

"Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Sisters and brothers, God knows us. God loves us. So may the Lord give us the strength and grace to examine our lives and live for love.