

Feb 1 Know It All's

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Remember growing up, that person in your class who seemed to be smarter than everyone else and let you know it? Or that person at work who had the answer for every problem, whether it was right or wrong? Remember what it was like to be around them? Then you understand why the Apostle Paul said knowledge makes people arrogant.

The Apostle Paul was dealing with a specific issue confronting the people of Corinth. Was it acceptable for them to eat meat sacrificed to idols? This was actually a bigger deal than we might suppose. Corinth held major temples to a variety of deities. Most of these temples practiced some form of animal sacrifice like we hear about occurring at the temple in Jerusalem. Only a small amount of the meat was actually placed on the sacrificial fire, the rest was sold to the butcher shops surrounding the temple. So, most of the meat available for consumption in Corinth had initially been sacrificed to an idol. Do you go buy that meat? Add to that question the fact that most temples held lavish banquets to which the community was invited, one of the only times poor people could get meat. Can a Christian attend the banquet and enjoy the meal without guilt?

Those were the questions of the day for Paul. They are not ours but the root problem Paul addressed is still with us. People had some legitimate questions and certain "know-it-all's" had the ready answer and tended to put down those who did not agree with them. We still deal with questions about knowledge. Paul says knowledge makes us arrogant. Now I might want to argue a bit with this statement. It is painting life with a broad brush, but we know why he says this.

Why is it that too much knowledge makes us this way? It has been my observation of others, and examining my own reactions, that whenever we think we know the answer we quit listening. Ever catch yourself in this trap? I am sure you have, for it is a pretty common condition. Someone is telling you their opinion or trying to persuade you to their line of thinking. You have thought about the same issue and have made up your mind. At that point it is hard to listen. You mentally turn them off because

they have nothing to say that you want to hear. Or, you have made up your mind on something. You have thought about it, prayed about it, discussed it with many and have come to a decision. Now you want to share your opinion with others. You are not going to listen to opposite points of view. People who function out of this type of mindset either when it comes to listening or sharing present that “know-it-all” attitude and Paul says that is the height of arrogance. Why is that? Because, Paul says, no one knows as much as they should know.

The first thing we are to hear is a call to humility. This is because we never know as much as we should know. I am sure we have all been in a situation where we had made a firm decision in our mind about something. We were sure we knew all of the relevant facts. Then we find out there was a gap in our knowledge and what we didn't know made all the difference. I recall a time when, at another church, the kitchen committee was upset because the youth group had left a mess in the kitchen. Dirty dishes were in the sink. There was talk about putting a lock on the door. Tensions were running high. Most in the kitchen committee had made up their mind before the meeting began. The youth leader came. She first apologized for the mess and then said there must have been a miscommunication because she had been told by one of the committee members to leave things because the kitchen committee was meeting the next day and they would clean up and that way they wouldn't have to run the dishwasher twice. There was a silence and then one of the members got very red in the face. The youth leader had not mentioned names but her telling the story reminded someone of their offer. She immediately admitted to the fact that she had forgotten what she said. Then the committee asked for forgiveness from the youth team and then they worked out a cleaning schedule that all could remember!! I always remember this incident from early in my ministry as I recall that we never have all the facts and so we need to be humble and be willing to listen with an open mind.

Paul goes on to say that love builds people up. This is the opposite of the arrogance of knowledge which tends to belittle and tear people down. So the second thing we are called to do is to listen with respect to others, especially when their ideas are different than ours. Listening respectfully doesn't mean that we agree with them,

which is sometimes how others take respectful listening. It is saying that I care about you. I believe that you too have thought through this decision you have made or that your opinion has come after struggling with it. I am listening because I believe you still have something to teach me in this matter. In Paul's situation some wanted to say that it was fine to eat meat sacrificed to idols because the idols were false and so it didn't matter. Enjoy the meat and attend the festivals. When others suggested it caused them to have a guilty conscience those in the know scorned them. Paul said we need to listen. We need to hear their concerns. We need to ask, "What is the loving response in a situation like this?" For Paul he decided that though he agreed with the knowledgeable ones he would still not eat meat because it might cause others to fail in their walk with God.

It is hard to keep a respectful attitude when you believe the other is wrong. You have thought about their point of view, rejected it or moved past it and then to hear it all over again is just maddening. We see this a lot in politics today. It is hard to keep a respectful attitude when the opinions of another seem like two steps back. Again, that first call to humility and the awareness that we don't know it all. We have to remind ourselves that to listen with respect does not mean agreeing.

Next, if we are to do the loving thing we have to have a certain amount of flexibility. Back to Paul, he says food won't bring us close to God. For him the issue wasn't really about eating meat. He says he could eat it or ignore it as it was all the same to him. See the flexibility? But instead he focused on what was central which was, for Paul, the inappropriate use of our knowledge. He calls it our freedom which would lead others to fall. Arrogance not meat was the issue. In certain things Paul would not budge but in many other places he was flexible, willing to adapt his opinions and his actions for others. We too, when there is conflicting opinions, need to step back and see the big picture. We have to not focus on the issue of the moment but the bigger piece and then be willing to be flexible in our actions if it is the loving and helpful thing for another.

But finally we have to do this with integrity. For Paul the issue was care for others in faith. If by our knowledge or actions we caused them to sin then no matter what our

reasons, we are wrong. He moved the conversation from is it morally or ethically wrong to eat meat sacrificed to idols to how do we help the weakest member of our group to grow in faith? All of a sudden, with the shift in the conversation, the answer becomes clear for Paul. He states, "I will never eat meat again" why, because I may cause my fellow believer to fall. Gone are all of the intellectual arguments and instead we have a focus on that which should not change.

Paul's vision is difficult because we are also called to be agents of transformation. This means we cannot hold onto the status quo just because a few refuse to change. But it is challenging us to move into change only when you do so from a position of understanding the ways it affects others and you do your best to not ignore their questions or their pain.

In closing I think about a story. She had gone off to college and her thinking about many social issues changed from the more narrow views she had had growing up in a small eastern Washington farming community. At first she tended to get into arguments with her extended family every time she came home. She wanted to teach them something and they wouldn't listen. Finally she came to realize that her approach wasn't working. She instead decided to love her family, not confront them, but also to not back down. When challenged she would listen to the person but ask that they hear her as well. This loving engagement over time changed the entire family. They learned there was a whole world out there of different opinions and she learned about some of the struggles and pain of the family over a generation of living in that community that had caused them to hold the beliefs they held. They came to support her, if not always agreeing with her, and she loved them while trying to change them. Love more than knowledge or being right triumphed and all were transformed.