



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 1, 2015**

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**“Knowledge Puffs Up, But Love Builds Up”**

(1 Corinthians 8:1).

Rev. David K. Groth

## Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Last Friday I went down to see my daughter Emily in Grinnell, a small college town in the middle of Iowa. Early on Saturday morning, I tip toed out of her apartment and walked to a nearby café. I was looking forward to settling into the Saturday edition of the newspaper and to good strong coffee to propel me through it. I sat with my back facing a group of about five or six older men. It came clear two of them at least were professors from the college, and one of *them* was doing most of the talking. He was articulate, organized, very bright, very persuasive and very conscious of his knowledge. He pretty much demolished any resistance to his ideas. I would love to sit in on his classes, but I'm not sure I would want him for a friend in a coffee shop. Again, there was very little give and take with that group. The professor had a lot of knowledge to share about a lot of topics, and by gum he was going to share it.

One by one, members of the group peeled away and quietly started for home. One fellow had a severe hobble in his gait. I have no idea what else was going on in their lives, but something is always going on in everybody's life, right? Everyone is hobbling around in some way and could use a little care and encouragement. But none of that was to be found around that table in Grinnell.

"Knowledge puffs up" wrote Paul, "but love builds up." The problem Paul is addressing is not immediately relevant to us but it was very relevant and thorny for the early Christians in Corinth. And it had to do with food sacrificed to idols.

In Corinth, animals were regularly sacrificed to the

pagan gods. These animals were divided into three parts. A token part was burned on the altar. The priests received a small portion. And then the worshipper received the rest of the meat. Usually he sold some of that to the markets. Sometimes he gave a banquet. So the question is, “Can a Christian eat meat that had been offered to a heathen god?” If he could not, he would be effectively be cut off from almost all social occasions in Corinth, which would severely hinder the mission of the church. Moreover, he wouldn’t be able to shop at the markets because most of the food there had been sacrificed first to heathen gods.

Some in Corinth argued that idols are not real, so the sacrifices did not matter and the food could be eaten. Others said eating food that was sacrificed to idols might be offensive to those weak in the faith. They may see it as a sign that you’re still holding on to the old idols while also worshipping Christ. This could lead astray those weak in the faith.

So it’s a mess. You can see the merits and faults on both sides of the equation. And you know, there are always some in the church who love a good battle! There are some who love to sink their teeth into no-win scenarios like this, and debate it back and forth, and draw a line in the sand and start thinking of those on the other side of the line as their opponents, enemies even, all the while forgetting they are brothers and sisters in Christ. Some even use such arguments as a platform to parade their knowledge.

For his part, Paul isn’t much interested in settling the quarrel for them. He’s more concerned about the Christians in Corinth that are going to interact with one another. Are they going to build one another up or tear one another down? He tells them they do indeed have the right to eat meat sacrificed to idols, because in Christ they are free, they are free from the Old Testament ceremonial laws which means they are free from the persnickety scruples about food. But they should be careful about how they use their freedom. In verse 8 Paul writes, “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of

yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”

The Corinthian Christians were facing enough challenges as it was. If they allowed themselves to be dragged into a fruitless conflict and debate it would sap their energy and creativity, and the tiny church there would quickly become irrelevant to the city around them.

“Knowledge puffs up” Paul tells them, “but love builds up.” Oh so true . . . still today . . . but knowledge is so much easier than love, isn’t it? Church people can get into a game of spiritual one-upmanship which is the exact opposite of the sacrificial love of Jesus which wants to build others up.

Pastor Peter Kelm works for the South Wisconsin District office and he recently wrote a little essay on this text. He writes, “My puffiness has been a problem my whole life . . . and I think it got worse when I was ordained. My knowledge as a pastor clearly outpaced my love as a disciple . . . I dare say it’s an occupational hazard. . . . Just go to a District convention or Synod convention and listen to the pronouncements from the microphone or the conversations in the hallways. You can almost see people getting puffed up. And let’s be clear . . . we’re all good at it.” “Laypeople can be good at it too!” (Mission Notes 1/15/15).

The Pharisees had a lot of knowledge, more than the vast majority, and that knowledge puffed them up. But they struggled with the love part, didn’t they? I would venture to say many of us are in the same boat. What knowledge puffs you up and makes you feel superior to those around you? At work what special skill set do you own that others do not? Does it ever make you feel conceited? Do you have experience that the recent hires do not? Of course you do. Does it puff you up so that you become impatient and rude? Have you had successes that others of lesser ability have not? Does that make you feel like a cut above the rest?

What knowledge do you have of your family dynamics which make you feel a little smug compared to a sibling or a cousin who keeps making poor choices.

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Or what knowledge do you have of the one you caught doing something shameful. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

If you’re one of our students at Good Shepherd Lutheran School, you have religion every single day. So you should know things that many of the kids in the public schools do not. Does that make you feel better than them? “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Or maybe you’re a public school student who has a special talent for math. You outshine most of the others and you can sense the teacher’s pride. Does that make you feel first rate while the others are second rate? Because you made Varsity verses JV and are getting a lot of playing time, does that puff up your ego? A major part in the play rather than a bit part? 1<sup>st</sup> chair trumpet rather than one of those guys down the row? “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Did you graduate magna cum lauda? But remember, it’s so much easier to know than it is to love. It’s easier to teach and test knowledge than it is to teach and test love.

In God’s economy, love is far more important than knowledge. Paul wrote “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I . . . understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13). “Nothing” he says. Zero. Zilch.

What’s the solution? The solution is not that we become ignorant. Not at all. There’s nothing evil about knowledge. It’s what knowledge tends to do to us. And there’s nothing commendable about ignorance. Ignorance is a great handicap of the faith. We worship God not just with heart and soul but also with our minds.

So what is the solution? (If only it were as simple as deflating a few footballs!) To deflate puffed up heads we do well to start with confession of sins. After all, it’s hard to be conceited when you’re saying, “I am a poor miserable

sinner . . .”

Reading God’s Word has a way of knocking us down a few notches (in a good way).

Remember also that whatever you think you do well, there’s always someone better at it, probably just around the corner. If you stand out in some way in Watertown, then go measure your skills against the best in Madison or Milwaukee, or LA, or Berlin. True knowledge does not lead to pride in what we know, but to humility because of what we do not know.

Another strategy is to measure your words. At work, when you’re feeling impatient with the new hire, before blurting out anything, ask yourself: Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary? Does it improve on the silence? “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Perhaps instead of tearing that person down, you can encourage and build them up and mentor them.

At school, when you’re feeling like hot stuff compared to some of your classmates, perhaps rather than strutting and preening, you can befriend them and build them up because you know Jesus loves them too. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

When you’re in a conversation with someone, search for balance. Ask more questions than you make statements . . . because you can always learn something from them, and besides, everyone has something they’re struggling with, right? Everyone is hobbling for one reason or another. Find out what it is for the sake of Christ who died for them. 2 Corinthians 1: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (vv3-5).

In our society, we place a high value on people with knowledge. We pay them more. We honor and respect them more. But really, it’s an artificial way of measuring a person’s worth. Do you ever remember Jesus putting a higher value on those with knowledge verses those without?

Or is it more the case that loves all people regardless of their IQ? He loves the little child throwing a tantrum no less than the esteemed professor. He loves and values the one with intellectual and developmental disabilities no less than the Nobel Laureate. He loves and values the elderly whose minds may not be as sharp as they used to be no less than the one who is in his prime. And the best news of all is he loves the contemptible sinner no less than the celebrated saint. It's such a foreign way of thinking to us that we half wonder if it could be true.

But it is true and it is Good News for you and me, for even though he knows all and sees all, all has all knowledge, still he loves us. He knows our sin, even the secret and silent ones up here [head] and still he loves us. His knowledge of us does not get in the way of his love for us. He is every bit as much a Savior for the puffed up and self-righteous as he is for the humble and penitent. He loves his Prodigal Son, but also the old brother in spite of his self-righteous conceit.

Knowledge has a way of puffing us up, but thanks be to God in Jesus Christ who forgives us, cleanses us, claims us, and saves us. Amen.

