

“Holy Hesitations”

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: 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. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists’, and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Let's pray together. Gracious God, you offer us your word. It is the living Word. And be with us now as we consider and reflect, as I share the words that came to my heart. May we together grow in wisdom and agape love. Amen.

Okay, as a teacher or a parent, have you ever spoken these words? Why? Because I said so, that's why [laughter]. Raise your hand. Yeah, guess what-- same with me [laughter]. You can say that for a while at home and get away with it, but when our children enter their teen years there's a dance that begins to take place between parents and child and if we're honest, probably a number of us did that dance with our parents as well. It's the moment, "Because I say so," moves into negotiation. When I step back I realize while it's frustrating, it's an important mark of maturing. Finding a safe place to learn how to find one's voice and make a case. By arguing with a parent, a child can learn both how to present another side and to

learn how to hold their own in the world. I'm not saying it's easy. Just that it's part of the maturation process. And I think for a lot of parents it's a time when we think, "When did my son or daughter become a lawyer [laughter]?" But we're reminded that it's important for us to understand, too, why we hold the positions we do. And the reasons behind them. And I'm going to share a story, but as I told these at the 8:15 service, what happens in this sanctuary stays in this sanctuary because my son's not here to defend himself. But one night a few years ago, we had a discussion/conversation/argument. Whatever it was, he was asking at the time, I wasn't excited about what he was proposing. And he, of course, had a smart answer for every concern I expressed. And finally, I said to him, "Do you really think this is a good idea? What if they do something really crazy?" And I heard my own words come back at me. He said, "It'll be okay, mom. And don't ask me, 'What if they all decide suddenly to jump off a cliff,' no, I won't follow them [laughter]."

So needless to say, that was just the beginning of the conversation. But it was one that needed to take place. And it forced me to understand my own rationale and to consider, though not necessarily agree with, a different perspective. It was the movement from parent to in control, (as if we ever are), to parent in charge. A movement from individual power to family or community conversations. And believe it or not, I think that's part of what Paul is trying to say in his letter to the Corinthians. They are experiencing growing pains. They're forming a community, it's a new community, and the people are from all kinds of backgrounds. And they write to Paul because as founder of their congregation, they knew and trusted him. And they also knew he was a Jew who knew the law. He had been educated in a school that's respected that covered many different perspectives about various topics. And he was a committed Pharisaic Jew. And a Pharisee, in a sense, is a lawyer for they interpret the laws of the Jewish faith. Sometimes they're very complex and nuanced. In fact, that's one of the things I do appreciate about the Jewish tradition. It, too, is a living faith with an ongoing dialogue exploring various perspectives and ideas, and you better know how to hold your own. Now remember Paul was once Saul, a very obsessed Pharisee who persecuted the earliest Christians. You can understand why when word got out that he had been converted, many of the early Christians were suspicious. But it was true. Paul had become a Christian, and in time, a great evangelist. He founded other churches in other cities through the power of his preaching and teaching and his deep, deep commitment.

I think Paul loved theological discussions. He approached them like case studies. So perhaps, part of his appeal and strength was that, as an educated Pharisee who had been converted, he understood both sides of the questions. So today, we hear his response to the Corinthians. They have written to him about concerns that had come up early in that community about the laws of Judaism, particularly regarding meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Corinth was a Greco-Roman city, a place where many of its population had long worshipped idols known locally in that place. But it also contained a fairly-sizeable Jewish community. Now, we remember that Jews offered animal sacrifices to God in the temple in Jerusalem. And in Corinth, the people there made sacrifices to local gods, and the meat of those sacrifices were available for people to eat. But Jews considered animals sacrificed to idols as wrong. They considered the meat tainted. And many of the Jews who had become followers of Jesus still kept their laws in the Jewish tradition. It was one of the few laws that the Gentiles were to observe. But there was some rumbling going on regarding whether or not meat sacrificed to idols that don't exist really is tainted.

Paul writes, "They know no idol in the world really exists, and there is no god but one." And so they said, "Why can't we eat meat sacrificed to non-existent idols? Why waste it?" Understanding the issue from both sides, Paul goes back and forth almost as if he's debating himself. In fact, scholars have said his argument is "so complicated, it seems to contradict itself." *I* But what Paul really focuses on is not the particulars of the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, but how this controversy is impacting the community at large. He says, "Yes, some of you may know more, as in being more aware and knowledgeable, but knowing more doesn't always mean knowing what's best. Is being right more important than considering the concern of another? If the eating of that meat undermines the community, should we still do it?" Paul asks. Paul suggests giving

up this meat in consideration of another person's struggle is not a bad idea. It's an act of community. Paul invites them to consider their behavior not as a means of controlling them but inviting them to live in ways that are considerate to those who are new in the faith. He says, "Don't chastise them. Think about where they're coming from." Paul reminds them and us that as people of faith, we're not just individual believers alone by ourselves, we are part of a larger community. What one person does impacts another. Paul says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," and that is the difference for Paul. What we do should build up, not pick away at the strength of a community. He feels that at times we need to stop and consider how to approach difficult issues. We may say, "He who hesitates is lost," but I think that at issue here is that at times we should hesitate. We should take holy hesitations to carefully think about the impact of our words.

I remembered a story from a Tuesday morning discussion group. ² We had watched a DVD on Religion in America. And one of the programs was devoted to the Jewish community and growth of its community in the United States. In the beginning of our nation, just a few thousand Jews were here. But during the mid-1800s, many Jews came from central Europe. And because there was so much land here and people were spread out, Judaism, as with Christianity, tend to be more local with the congregations than across denominational lines. And so they had more autonomy. And a Jewish man named Wise wanted to shape the growing Jewish communities into a more American group. And he considered that in this new land of opportunity, there were some laws that no longer needed to be observed. Especially regarding food. He planted a seminary in Ohio to train new rabbis, and it's still a very well respected seminary. When the first class graduated though, he wanted people from around the country to see what they had done. He planned a special dinner and invited guests from Jewish congregations all over, and many of them came and an elaborate banquet was planned. But when the food came out, many of those were offended and dismayed. Unlike the kosher law, milk was served with meat, shrimp and crab shellfish were served. And if you know about kosher law, you know this isn't kosher. But some say it was the mistake of the caterer, but Wise never apologized. He thought he knew better. And instead of building bridges, he tore them down. Wise, the man, was not very wise.

Paul, however, is wise. He understood the questions that people were asking from both sides. He advocated that the body of Christ does not focus on uniformity, but unity. That unity found in the body of Christ. And he accepts that sometimes other perspectives are worth considering. Indeed, Paul doesn't attack one side of the debate or the other, he attacks both sides. Or, more precisely, he attacks anyone who reflects an attitude that says, "I'm right, you're wrong, and it's wrong of you to think and act the way you do." ³ For Paul, this is destructive to the body. He tells them that sometimes people need to stand back and listen. Listen to those who struggle and may not understand yet. Why would we want to put a stumbling block in their way? Just to be right? Or at least to think so? Why make fun of people, or call them names, or ostracize them? In today's terms, one scholar noted Paul goes after both sides of liturgical wars, talk radio hosts, even ideologically deadlocked members of Congress and says, "Tape this on your mirror so that everytime you see yourself you also see these words, 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.'" ⁴ Paul reminds us that sometimes we may know quite a bit as far as the facts or concerns. But we may not know better. Wrestling with issues is not about always being right, but being thoughtful. For Paul, the root of this is agape love. Loving concern and kindness. It involves the ability to walk in another's shoes and the willingness to do so. It may mean putting someone else before ourselves and considering holy hesitations. Because while we are a people called by faith one by one, we live it out as a community. We are accountable to God and accountable in our behavior towards others.

Perhaps it's no surprise then if we go along in this letter from Paul and we arrive at Chapter 13. And here are the words of one of his most beloved passages about love, "Love, agape love, is patient and kind. Not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right. Agape love hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. For the greatest of these is the power and the gift of love." May we live by love and not just facts. May our purpose not be focused always on

winning, but seeking ways through holy hesitations to build up the body of Christ and to shape it with wisdom and love. Amen.

- 1) Interpretation Series, I Corinthians, by Bruce N. Fisk, pp. 134-135
- 2) God In America: How Religious Faith Shaped America, by PBS
- 3) Preach This Week online under Textweek.com on I Corinthians 8:1-13 by Frank Crouch
- 4) Again from Crouch's article