

## Love Builds Up

### **Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 28, 2024**

*Readings:* Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28; Psalm 111

*Sermon text:* Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 1 Cor 8:2

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” So St Paul responds to someone who claims that “all of us possess knowledge.” True, but be careful not to think too highly of yourself based on that, Paul warns. It is part of a long letter written while Paul was in Ephesus in response to reports he has received of disputes among the members of the church he planted in Corinth on a variety of issues. They are reports of sexual immorality—and excessive asceticism; of non kosher food eaten by some who know they are free from strict obedience to Torah law by the new dispensation that Paul has declared is extended to new believers from gentile backgrounds—and this leads to disputes over what is permitted—even meat sacrificed to idols? Some are parading their superior spiritual enlightenment and knowledge before others—just as some who are rich are eating in plenty while others look on with nothing. Some are suing other Christians in secular courts, instead of working out their differences within the church. Some declare that they are followers of Apollos, another apostle, others Paul or Peter. Paul reminds them that Jesus is the only name by which they are baptized, though he himself has earned the right to speak and teach as called by God to be an apostle. But in any case God gives various gifts—of teaching, of prophecy, of hospitality and so on— to all people not for self promotion or lording over others but to build up the community, the body of Christ. Besides, the foolishness of God exceeds the greatest wisdom of humans—the cross is the ultimate lesson in that.

Jesus is the one whose authority we can completely trust. Jesus is the ultimate example of prophetic authority, not only speaking the Word of God but being in person the incarnation of the Word.

And he claimed his authority early on—as we hear in Mark’s account of his first sermon on Capernaum, announcing the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled, now is the advent of Jubilee, the forgiveness of debts and the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Even the unclean spirit knew who he was.

But a proper sense of our own limitations does not diminish the need for leadership. Though Moses died he consoled the Israelites with the promise that God would send them prophets and readers after his own heart. Jesus trained his disciples to carry on his work.

So let's pause it right here and ask ourselves, how does this connect to our lives today?

1. Leadership is not for the faint of heart. The people preferred that Moses ascend to the mountain covered in lightning and thunder. And they were right, it was dangerous to be a prophet. God warns that false prophets shall die, but true prophets are also prone to getting stoned to death by powerful enemies.
2. Humanity being what it is, any leader will find it is difficult to maintain group consensus—Moses faces a lot of grumbling and feuds; he is also overburdened, until his father-in-law Jethro advises him to appoint responsible people for all the things that can be settled easily. The burdens and decisions of leadership need to be shared.
3. It is important to acknowledge that everyone has gifts for leadership—albeit in different ways, as Paul makes clear—but it is critical that our talents should be put toward work that builds up the whole, not the part, and certainly not just the self.
4. Leadership structures, whether old-fashioned kings and priests or new-fashioned democracies or autocracies must be open to prophets—that is, allow and be open to accepting criticism and correction—or else face damaging community conflict. This is a form of humility often difficult for people who have strong visions and feel driven to accomplish their goals.
5. Bottom line: leadership is team sport not a solo effort. Moses had his siblings Aaron and Miriam—and the people appointed as lower court judges and those who received the gift of prophecy at the tent of meeting. We have presidents and prominent leaders—think Martin Luther King Jr—but they all depend on many others, like Bayard Rustin, the great organizer of the march for Freedom, whose recent bio pic is worth seeing, or Ella Baker, whose often-quoted line is strong people don't need strong leaders—and

advocated for grassroots participatory democracy throughout her long career in civil right activism.

And that, oddly enough, brings me back to Jesus—who instead of appointing a single disciple to follow him as solo leader, as Moses appointed Joshua, preferred the model of dispersed authority—twelve disciples. In turn, these disciples became apostles spreading the good news of Christ as risen lord, adding leaders, like Paul, appointing successors like Timothy, Mark and Luke, and so the movement spread. Go out in pairs, Jesus instructed them—be brave and travel light. Bring peace and light, and those who have ears to hear will hear what you are saying and the good news will spread.

There have been a lot of years and all kinds of models of church authority structures since then—including of course the single leader model of the Roman Catholic Church or the pure grassroots models of radical anabaptist traditions. I prefer the conciliar model of the Eastern churches, and I also like a clear organization structure to preserve the faith while being open to new truths from the Spirit—and I think the Episcopal Church is in that tradition.

But the takeaway I hope to leave you with this morning is whatever you or I think we know, what great plans and visions we might have, it all depends on love, for God and each other. For knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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