

The Church has been divided for as long as there has been a Church. The disciples debated, “Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” The New Testament would be very different if the Early Church did not go through deep debates that set one against another; in particular, 1 Corinthians would be very different (if it were even written at all) if that congregation was not divided to the point of being in peril: *1 Corinthians 8:1–3 (NRSV) Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.*

The Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) is going through a time of division and separation. The issue of the day is gay marriage. We’ve lost members over it. Our denomination is losing churches over it. And this division has come to Reading: our brothers and sisters at First Presbyterian Church are in the process of leaving the PCUSA.

My point this morning is not to debate gay marriage. Some of us are for it; some of us are against it. This is the deepest division of all; a fault line that threatens each and every church today just as much as the conflict over eating meat sacrificed to idols threatened the Corinthian church.

My point is not to debate the issue of the day, because the issue of gay marriage will fade and pass away like so many other questions. What will not fade away; what will challenge us as a congregation and us as followers of Jesus Christ is how we will respond when we disagree about something (and we will!). Will we simply stand strong because they’re wrong and we’re right? We know better! Will we know better, or will we be better?

1. Know Better

Questions seek answers; and the way we ask the question impacts the answer we find. When the Corinthians wrote their letter to Paul which occasioned his reply; they asked the question, “Is it right to eat meat sacrificed to idols?” This sounds terribly obscure to us, which makes me wonder how our issues will sound in 100 years; but, if we wanted to go out to dinner in 1st century Corinth, we went to the temple. If we wanted some lamb for dinner, the butcher shop would not have labels telling us that this lamb was organic and idol free while this lamb was not organic and not idol free. The butcher shop would just have lamb, and it probably came from the temple.

So the question goes much deeper – can Christians connect with their culture at all, or are we supposed to disconnect and keep ourselves pure? Because we know better should that set us apart?

The Amish have their buggies. Roman Catholics have their schools. Presbyterians take a more difficult path. On the one hand, our history is marked by division; this isn't the first time our denomination has seen members and churches leave. This is the price we pay for daring to wrestle with the questions. We choose to engage the ambiguity and uncertainty, for one of our core values stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith is that "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men [and women] which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.109, emphasis added, written 1646).

For some, this is deeply threatening. We demand answers. We want the security that comes from knowing. Knowing better provides peace; knowing better lowers our anxiety. Knowing better gives us clarity: Right and wrong, good and evil, us and them.

No wonder our conflicts can become so intense! We have a lot to lose: Peace, serenity, security. Life is good when we know better! We have all the answers until someone raises a new question.

We'll do whatever it takes to know better. We'll tear our church apart. We'll set neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, brother against sister. We'll do whatever it takes to know better.

2. Be Better

One of the signs that we've fallen again for the false promises of "knowing better" is that our thinking becomes disjunctive: In or out, up or down, this or that, we think in terms of either/or. After all, we're either right or wrong, right?

Paul doesn't fall for this trap. He doesn't limit his choices to the ones the Corinthians offered. He offers a third way, *1 Corinthians 8:1–3 (NRSV) Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

² *Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge;* ³ *but anyone who loves God is known by him.*

Love is more than knowing better; love is being better; knowledge keeps us at a safe distance; we relate to one another as abstractions: Liberals, conservatives, pro-life, pro-choice. We dehumanize one another into labels defined by slogans.

Paul profoundly re-humanizes us: *1 Corinthians 8:11–12 (NRSV)* ¹¹ *So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.* ¹² *But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*

Paul reminds us that we are all children of God for whom Christ died; that person with whom we disagree so profoundly is created in the image of God and is loved by God. If God loves them, we are called to love them too.

Love isn't abstract. Love doesn't keep a safe distance. Love gets up close and personal. Love enters into our fear and frustration; it embraces our anxiety and uncertainty, our doubt and fear. Love is being fully present with someone in the midst of it all – the ignorance and the “knowing better.” Love is being with someone in a way that lifts them up and makes them better.

Love is the challenge for the Church, the PCUSA, and for us, Pennside Presbyterian Church, in this age when we are tearing apart the body of Christ because we know better.

Pray for our brothers and sisters at First Presbyterian Church. It is an awful thing to lose our church family; it is an awful thing when us becomes them.

Pray and prepare. Some current members may soon be looking for a new church home and a new church family. At least, I hope they will; I hope they will not be so wounded by this experience that they leave the church altogether.

We can be a healing place for them; we can be a safe place. One of our strengths is our capacity to hold very different opinions and yet remain in relationship with one another. We are liberal and conservative. We are right and left. We are rich and poor. We are for gay marriage and we are against gay marriage.

Every church has its own culture; its way of being church. We have already faced the challenge of blending the two into one when members of Olivet Presbyterian Church came to Pennside. We loved one another; we honored the loss; we embraced the gifts; and we moved forward together.

1 Corinthians 8:1 (NRSV) *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* We didn't know better; we were better. All of us, Olivet and Pennside, were better; Mt Penn, Lower Alsace and

Exeter Townships, Reading, Berks County, Lehigh Presbytery and beyond were “built up” because we were better. We loved one another.

We did it before. Do it again. Do more than know better; be better. Amen.