

January 29, 2012

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

“Huffing and Puffing”

Does everyone here know the old story of “The Three Little Pigs”? I expect most of us do- but the old stories and nursery rhymes may not be so familiar to young kids today. I was tickled recently to hear my youngest grandson, 20 months old, singing his own version of “Baa, baa, Black Sheep”, which his mother, my daughter, did not remember from HER childhood.! He’s learning it in daycare.

Ok, so the three little pigs needed a place to live. The first one decided the easiest way to make a house in a hurry was with straw. When it was built he sat inside singing a taunting song, daring his old enemy, the wolf, to get at him in his cozy little straw house. The wolf shows up, taunts back. “Little pig, little pig, let me IN!” The pig refuses, responding with something about the “hair on my chinny, chin, chin”. The wolf threatens to “huff and puff and blow your house in!” The wolf, of course, intends to eat the pig. The pig stands fast, but the house doesn’t. After the huffing and puffing of the wolf and the demolition of his home, the pig escapes to his brother’s place.

Repeat of the story, right? The second brother put a bit more work into his house, building it with sticks, but the taunting song is followed by the arrival of the wolf, who again demands the door be opened. The pigs refuse by the “hair on their chinny, chin, chins”. And again, the huffing and puffing wipe out the building.

Off the two run to the home of the third brother. He made his house of bricks. He’s a good Joe and lets them in. The taunting song leads to a huffing and puffing wolf, who FAILS to blow the house down. Depending on the era in which you heard this story, the wolf meets a bad end in various ways. The earliest versions have the wolf slide down the chimney as a kind of “anti-Claus”. He ends up in a boiling pot over the fire and is cooked to death. Later, less violent versions have him expire from hyperventilation, or run off never to be seen again.

What do the three little pigs have to do with us, with church, or God? The story came to me as a teaching aid. It illustrates some things about our Epistle reading for today. The lesson appears in Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. Paul is teaching about safe houses for living, and unsafe

houses. Paul is teaching about knowledge, and being the kind of “know-it-all” who thinks he knows everything. Paul is teaching about the kind of attitude that leads us to sing cocky songs inside straw houses, the kind of attitude that leads to huffing and puffing. Paul is teaching about putting love before knowledge, (as he did in the past few Sundays’ epistle readings), so we might quit huffing and puffing, and live safely together in a sturdily built house.

This letter of Paul offers vivid pictures of the actual life of a particular church in the middle of the first century. There were many doctrinal and ethical problems that were stirring up the Corinthian church. We’ve reflected on how one group disdained the physical and thought only the spiritual mattered. They saw knowledge as the means to salvation, and the only thing we should care about. Paul addressed this group, who appeared to be worshipping KNOWLEDGE, rather than GOD.

He said they were putting too much emphasis on what is KNOWN. “We know...” they kept saying. Paul pointed out that

- Knowledge is very often self-deceiving and illusory;
- True Knowledge consists in the recognition of our ignorance;
- Knowledge does not produce consideration for others;
- Very often it leads the ones “in the know” to become impatient and condescending to others.

For Paul, love was the priority. Knowledge can lure us away from love. Knowledge leads us to tear people down. Love builds up. Love continues to care about, have concern for, and compassion for others whose perspectives are not our own.

The Corinthian problem over eating meat that was offered to idols seems bizarre to us today. Why would such a furor erupt over that kind of issue? The KNOWLEDGE IS EVERYTHING church members taught that they KNEW eating food offered to idols is NOT something God opposed or cared about. But many ancient Christian writings rejected that position. See Acts 15:29, calling Christians to abstain from “food sacrificed to idols, and from blood and what is strangled.” Later writings, of early church fathers, like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, suggest that the only ones who eat idol-offered foods are false Christians and heretics.

So Paul's was a lonely voice. He called Christians to reject eating idol-offered food, but not out of obedience to a rule, or out of a sense of its uncleanness. He called the church to avoid eating it out of concern for the feelings of other brothers and sisters in Christ. Knowing the feelings of some of the recently converted members of the congregation, the group of meat-eaters could very easily choose not to flaunt their eating of "forbidden" foods", not to eat them in the presence of those they knew would be troubled by it, or not to eat them, perhaps, at all.

Paul alone put the priority of Christian love above the particulars of church law. Knowledge must be placed within the demands of love; knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

The piggies and wolf could have benefited from Paul's teaching. They did not understand that true knowledge consists in recognizing our ignorance. The first pigs didn't recognize their ignorance when it came to building houses. The wolf didn't recognize his ignorance about house building materials; which can, and which cannot be blown away. They all illustrate the point that knowledge puffs up. The pigs, sure they were safe and secure, sang their taunting little songs. The wolf, sure he could get the better of them, huffed and puffed. But they were all wrong. They had deceived themselves.

The issue in Paul's church, idol offered food, is not with us today, but the SITUATION sure is. Christians have widely varying positions on God's will concerning the ordination of women, the place of homosexual persons in the church, the wrongness or rightness of abortions being legally available...just to name a few of the tough ones. And Paul is clear, friends: Love continues to care about, have concern for, and compassion for others whose perspectives are not our own. Paul calls us to put love before opinions, to put relationships before issues. This continues to be a great challenge for the church.

The piggy story illustrates this truth also, although imperfectly. That third brother took the time to build a strong and solid house—the kind of house love can build. He welcomed his brothers, even though they were lacking in knowledge. That's what love would do. But here the analogy breaks down. Even that third piggy sings the taunting song. The wolf is still huffing and puffing. They are still all out to destroy each other,

Paul would tell those critters that clinging to KNOWLEDGE as the highest good, to our desire to be RIGHT—will just keep that taunting song ringing and the huffing and puffing will go on and on. Only love, Christ's love, can stop the taunting song. Only love, Christ's love, can stop the huffing and puffing. Perhaps love could even open the door. Perhaps love could even tame the wolf.

Jesus said it plainly my friends, "Love one another as I have loved you." Paul reminds us that all we know is limited--- and that our knowing must always be contained within the circle of our loving.

Today we leave the church to enter a world where we do not all believe the same things. We go into a world where wolves huff and puff, and piggies sing taunting songs.

Let's go, and seek to love that very world with Christ's love. Amen.