

“What Do You Know?” (1 Corinthians 8:2) Epiphany 4, February 1, 2009

What do you say to your wife as you await the birth of your first child? Through the centuries, husbands have said many things, but none could be wiser than what one of my friends told his wife on the way to the hospital: *“Well, honey, in just a few hours we will no longer be the world’s greatest parents.”*

Most parents figure this out eventually, but to *start out* knowing that you don’t know all you need to know – what an advantage that is! And this isn’t just true for parents. It’s true in any circumstance of life. For instance, over the years I have prepared lots of couples for marriage. Some nervously admit they could use a little guidance; others are so sure of themselves they think counseling is a waste of time. Which ones are more likely to succeed? The ones who know that they don’t know all they need to know! Likewise, over the years many of you have hired new employees right out of college. Some frankly admit they have a lot to learn; others act like they’re God’s gift to the company. Which ones are more likely to succeed? The ones who know that they don’t know all they need to know! Sure, it’s humbling to admit this, but it also makes us more teachable, more attentive, less likely to slip up or get blind-sided. Plus, it’s the truth. Embrace this truth and it will set us free. Ignore this truth and it can cost us! For our own good, it’s always wiser to assume we don’t know all we need to know.

St. Paul had to learn this truth the hard way. As a Pharisee, what a know-it-all he had been! So sure he had a monopoly on the truth! So sure he was right to persecute Christians! So sure the risen Christ was just a myth! So sure until he met Christ...face to face...on the road to Damascus. That knocked him off his high horse – literally and spiritually. A humbling experience? You bet! And just what he needed! A disillusioning experience? That, too – in the most positive sense! It took away his illusion of knowing it all – of ever being able to know it all – which, in turn, made him more careful about judging people or their motives, more cautious about assuming the worst, and more aware of the temptations that come *with* knowledge: feeling it makes you superior, thinking you know better, seeing no need to consider other opinions...or respect the people who hold them. No doubt that’s why he wrote: **“Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.”** Experience had taught him well: that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing; that even a lot of knowledge is dangerous if we think we know it all; and that what’s most dangerous is *thinking* we know “what just ain’t so.” All these insights are wrapped up in our text: **“Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.”**

As usual, Paul wrote this in response to a particular problem – fortunately, one that doesn’t trouble us anymore. It had to do with what a Christian could and could not eat. Back then, some Jewish Christians still believed you had to eat kosher, and some Gentile Christians believed you must not eat anything that had been sacrificed to idols. Since most of the meat sold in the marketplace was not kosher, and since there was no way of knowing whether it had been sacrificed to

idols, this was a big problem for them. What's more, a lot of social, business, and political events were held in pagan temples. Naturally, the food served had been sacrificed in those temples, and not to eat it would be a major insult to the host – one that could really cost you! So what was a Christian to do? Nowadays, we might think: *No big deal. Kosher laws don't apply to us, pagan gods don't exist, so there's no sin involved. Go ahead and eat.* But back then, it was a little more complicated than that.

Unfortunately, it's hard to think of a similar situation these days, so to show why the problem was more complicated, I'll need to use a kind of bizarre illustration. Let me just apologize in advance. Imagine that your "big boss" has invited you to dinner, and imagine that what happens at this dinner could make or break your career. So you sit down at the table, fully aware how much is at stake, and your hostess proudly announces the main course: *Fricassee of French Poodle*. Disgusting, I know! But what do you do? You know that eating this won't kill you. You know that eating it is not a sin. And you know how much is at stake if you don't partake. So you might just force yourself eat it anyway. You might.

That would be tough enough, but now imagine this complication. Right across the table sits a brand-new Christian, who is also a fervent dog-lover. And she's just horrified! To her, killing and cooking a poodle is monstrous! The only thing worse would be to eat it. And she feels this so strongly that if she saw you eating it – you, a faithful Christian – that would not just discredit you, it would discredit the church and even Jesus Himself. It would wreck her faith. So again, what do you do? There's no talking sense to her. This feeling goes way too deep. There's no explaining why it is not a sin; you are free to do what you like; and this could affect your career. She won't buy that! No, it comes down to is this: Do you save your career by eating or abstain to save her faith? What do you do?

Amazingly, there were people in Corinth who would have eaten the meal anyway – their logic being: *I know it's not a sin, and that's all that matters.* In fact, they were pretty uppity about it. *If someone doesn't know it's not a sin, too bad! That's their problem. I'm not changing just for them! I know better!*

So now consider Paul's response. Yes, yes, he said in effect, *you do know better, but it's pretty obvious you do not know all you need to know. Like: that you're acting very selfish, which is a sin. And you're acting very superior – also a sin. And you're acting like this person's faith and feelings don't matter – also a sin. In short, for all you claim to know, you obviously don't know much about what matters most; you don't know much about Christian love. Your "knowledge" just "puffs" you "up." Christian "love builds up." So don't be so sure you know all you need to know. in fact, think about this: **"Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge."***

Two thousand years have passed since Paul wrote these words. The specific problem no longer troubles us, yet, now that we understand the underlying

issues, it's easy to see why this verse applies to our lives today. For instance, we may not worry about keeping kosher or eating food sacrificed to idols, but there are still "**food issues**" we need to be sensitive about. Like: if someone is an alcoholic, hopefully we know better than to encourage them to drink "just a little" for social purposes. Hopefully we're sensitive enough not to drink in front of them at all. And that's good...for a start. But do we also remember that some people have eating addictions? Or that some people have food allergies? And are we just as sensitive to their challenges, or do we not take them as seriously? "*Oh, go ahead. Eat just a little. Just a little can't hurt you!*" But actually, it can. Here too, just a little can hurt a lot, however much we may think we know otherwise. So this is one case where it would be wiser to assume we don't know all we need to know; one case where it's worth remembering: "**Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.**"

This verse also sends a strong message about **getting along with each other** in Christian love. You know, there was no reason why the Corinthian church had to be divided over what Christians could or could not eat. Paul gave clear instructions about handling their differences. Had the members followed their own consciences and avoided offending those who felt differently, things would have been just fine. But no, each side was so sure they knew better than Paul and way better than the other side, so this issue did divide them. Instead of showing love or even tolerance, they got stuck in debating who knows better.

These days, too, issues come up that need not divide us. But they sure can! In fact, folks often fight more fiercely over trivial stuff than over moral or doctrinal issues! Want an example? Just to stay on the safe side, let me share one from my former church: the *battle over ducks*. At the time, we were remodeling bathrooms. One of the women on the building committee felt that the men's bathroom looked kind of blah – "like the inside of a refrigerator," she said. So she put up what she considered very masculine wallpaper border; it had ducks on it. Well, the chairman of the property board didn't like it. And no one had asked his permission. So he had the ducks removed. The committee woman didn't like *that*, so she put up more ducks. He had them removed, too. And so it went. Ducks went up, ducks came down, ducks went up, ducks came down, until the woman finally told the property chairman, "I've got a whole roll of ducks, and no matter how many times you take them down, I will just keep putting them back up." He stalked away furious. A few days later, he quit the church. Over ducks.

Now, it's easy to see how trivial *that* was, but how often do equally trivial issues cause division? I don't need to list them. Think about issues that have gotten people steamed up over the years. How many of them mattered as much as we let them? How many of them were handled lovingly? And how many of them were fueled by the attitude: "I know better than you do!"? Oh, it might have been stated differently. "That's too modern." "That's old-fashioned." "We've always done it this way." "We've never done it that way." And all of that may have been true, but we're talking about "taste," and "preference," and "procedure." Is that

really worth taking up sides? Playing good guys versus bad guys? Or smart guys versus dumb? Of course not! And if we don't know that, we don't know all we need to know. Here again, it's worth remembering: **"Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge."**

And having said that, I guess there is one more application I'd better admit to: the need for **humility**. It's easy for a preacher to point the finger at this, that, or the other, and I've just done a lot of that, haven't I? Well, as I did, you may have noticed three fingers pointing back at me – one asking, *"Who thinks he knows more?"* one asking, *"Who thinks he knows better?"* and one asking, *"Who's awfully sure he is right?"* I noticed them, too. As a pastor, it is my duty to point out what's right and wrong. Actually, that's true for all of us in our particular realm. But to do a good job of it, some humility is called for. When we're talking about right and wrong, for instance, we want to be careful not to personalize it: *I'm* right, *you're* wrong; *my* approach is right; *your* approach is wrong. Even if that seems true, even if it is true, showing some humility is much more helpful.

How so? Let me illustrate with a personal example. Over the years, I have gotten a few harsh letters detailing my failures as a pastor. I've been told how I should or should not minister, what I should or should not preach, even who I should or should not pray for. I'm not proud to admit it, but when that happens, my response is predictable. First, I feel hurt. Then I get defensive. And then, if I'm not careful, I get judgmental. I think: *What a know-it-all! They're being so unfair! They'd never have written this if they knew the situation as well as I do!* And that may be true. But in that moment, it's also irrelevant. For in that moment, who's also acting like a know-it-all? I am. And think where this attitude might lead. If I've labeled someone else a know-it-all and don't see that in myself, am I likely to take them seriously? No. Am I likely to act in a spirit of love? No. Am I even likely to consider their opinion – much less care about what lies beneath it, or why they're upset, or how to move forward? No. So to handle this positively, some humility is called for. Genuine humility. I need to set pride aside and assume I don't know all I need to know.

Now, I'll bet most of us have faced such situations. When attacked by a know-it-all, isn't it easy to turn into one ourselves? But that never helps. Humility does. Assuming we don't know all we need to know helps us love the person anyway. It helps us give them the benefit of the doubt. It helps us try to understand them and see whether they might have a point, even if it's not the specific point they're making. So for all these reasons, again it's worth remembering: **"Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge."**

Paul learned this truth the hard way. Fortunately, we don't have to. In a chapter that just seems to be about "food issues," he gives us a lot of food for thought - about knowledge, its limits, and its temptations; about the need for sensitivity, tolerance, and humility. Most of all he sends us home with this practical reminder: it's always wiser to assume we don't know all we need to know. Amen.

