Strange Bedfellows

February 1, 2015

Mark 1: 21-28
1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

“...we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

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Welcome to the first Sunday in February… America’s most religious day. Indeed, perhaps it’s the most religious day in the world. It’s Super Bowl Sunday. Millions of people worldwide will religiously congregate with friends and family around their TV sets and computer screens, and about 90,000, give or take 10,000 or so, will actually go to the sanctuary, the worship site in Arizona. Some people will faithfully make hors d’oeuvres and snacks, and drink beer and wine and sodas. In this religious service, we will sing, or we’ll listen to some singing with the National anthem sung by Broadway star Idina Menzel and pop superstar Katy Perry performing at halftime. With varying degrees of devotion, most of us will pay homage to two most powerful teams, in the NFL who will duke it out on the gridiron.

And who could forget the commercials and the TV announcements? Many of us come to this religious event just for those! Popular companies like Budweiser, Doritos, and GoDaddy.com will encourage us make our offerings by purchasing and consuming their products.

Oh! And God will be invoked by the more religious players, and credit will be given to God for the great play, and the winners? Undoubtedly some on the winning team will praise the Almighty for giving them the win, when very likely, God doesn’t give a hill of beans as to which team wins.

And just like you would normally do for a typical Sunday morning sermon, tomorrow, in our offices, or at the water coolers, you will gather and discuss the wonders of this religious event. In our lunchtime conversations, many of us will laugh about which TV commercial was the funniest, and which one moved us to tears, while some others of us will pro-
fess to have enough knowledge about the rules of the game so that we can be armchair quarterbacks and couch-potato referees who scrutinize every controversial call. Ah…! Today is America’s most religious day—not the most meaningful of spiritual days, but it is the most religious.

It’s interesting to make this comparison because in Paul’s day, he strove to help the new Christians in Corinth become aware of what were meaningful spiritual Christian practices in comparison to what were un-meaningful religious practices.

Many of these new Christians in the city of Corinth were practicing pagans first. So, they were very familiar with the pagan practice of sacrificing animals to idols, these wooden or stone statues that pagans worshipped. Paul essentially knew that this was a non-meaningful religious practice because God is not in a statue; in fact, for all Christians, “there is one God from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things exist, and through whom we exist,” says Paul.

One bible commentator tells us that it’s important for us to realize that idol-food offered to the idols is a big deal in Corinth, and unfortunately it’s found all over the city. Corinthians will frequently sacrifice an animal to a Greek god or goddess, burn some of the meat on an altar, and then eat some of it in a ritualistic meal. The remainder of the sacrificial animal is sold to the local meat market, which then turns around and re-sells it to the public. It’s kind of gross, but economical—you can probably get a pretty good deal on previously offered slightly used idol-meat.

This poses a problem for the Christians of Corinth, some of whom don’t want to be associated with meat that has been sacrificed to a Greek god. Given their choice, they won’t ever eat such meat, but it’s tough to avoid it, since it can pop up at the local market, or at a neighbor’s Super bowl dinner party, or some religious festival somewhere else. So, in a letter addressed to Paul that is now lost to antiquity, they asked Paul, “What are we Christians supposed to do?”

Paul’s answer that he wrote back was simple: concerning food sacrificed to idols? It’s neither good or bad if you eat the meat or if you don’t
eat it. He says that they know the meat was offered to a god that doesn’t exist, so they can eat it without any worry about guilt by association. It’s just meat. “Food will not bring us close to God.” And, because they possess this knowledge, they could sit and eat idol meat anywhere they wanted, even in the pagan temple, if they desired.

But, the problem is, not all the new Christians are strong in their knowledge that there is only one God. They were so used to the pagan belief that there are many gods. So, if one of those not-so-strong Christians were to see a fellow Christian sitting in the restaurant at the pagan temple munching on some idol meat, it could likely confuse that person and run the risk that he or she of weak faith relapses back into pagan belief. So, Paul teaches, for the sake of love for the other person, they should abstain from eating food offered to the idols, even though it’s not a problem to eat it.

In this sense, acting in one way based on your knowledge of God and understanding of scripture is always secondary to acting in another way based on love. Having knowledge of scripture is not enough for the scribes in Jesus’ day to heal the man with the mental illness. Yes, they know about God. They know about the Torah. But did they have love in their hearts? But, Jesus with knowledge of scripture and a love of God (which is where his authority comes from) healed the man, and brought him back into the community. And the scribes were astounded. “A new teaching!” they said.

In our day, this principle applies in several ways, some are less serious, and others more serious. For example, I may know that God doesn’t care what I’m wearing when I come to worship in this sanctuary… You know that! Right. God doesn’t care what you look like! I may be wearing jeans and a t-shirt, or shorts and flip flops in the summer. I may know that if I worship God with utmost respect and joy in my heart, and I give God my time, and all my senses are tuned into God’s holy presence, I know God will not care what I’m wearing.

But, if I come into the sanctuary to worship looking like that, and someone nearby hasn’t cultivated the same understanding of worship, and maybe that someone is drifting on their journey of faith, isn’t it pos-
sible that my unkempt dress could cultivate within that person a level of disinterest in showing God utmost respect? So, out of love and respect for God and for my fellow faith journeyer, and for building up the body of Christ, I will dress well when it comes to entering this sanctuary to worship God. My inner spirituality that is reflected in my outer behavior can have an effect on the realities of others.

Or, much more seriously, some inspiring words by Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr. help us see this principle at work: “In abolishing slavery and in ordaining women we’ve gone beyond biblical literalism. It’s time we did the same with gays and lesbians. The problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that condemn it, but rather how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ. It can’t be done.” (William Sloane Coffin, retrieved from personal Facebook email, January 30, 2015). Love that builds up always trumps knowledge that puffs up.

Knowledge and love, both exist side by side in our lives, like strange bedfellows. Both are important, but love brings out the qualities God looks for in us, don’t you think?

People often take personal satisfaction in showing others how much we know. Knowledge puffs us up: It can make us look good in others’ eyes. But I think God is much more interested in how much we love.

The business world says “knowledge is power!” And, it is! But Jimi Hendrix has correctly said, “When the power of love becomes stronger than the love of power, we will have peace” (retrieved from personal email January 31, 2015).

The bottom line is that we are to walk in the spirit of Christ Jesus; indeed it’s his spirit that lives in us. So, in the way we live as Christians, we live a lifestyle that honors God. We are to do this all the time, everywhere, in thought, word, and deed. And we do so with the knowledge that others are watching, especially our children in our families, or our children who are around us here in church. In our relationship to them, perhaps part of our calling is to provide the best possible vision of mature, playful, compassionate, faithful, loving, God-honoring Christians.
we can be. And that builds up the church.

Our personal lifestyle brings health and wholeness to the whole body. Our individual behaviors matter. Our attentiveness to God in our individual prayer lives matters. Our prayers in our communal life as a church and our fellowship with one another as human beings matters.

So today, as most of us share in the fellowship with friends and family watching the Super Bowl, and for those of us who are not watching it, let us all strive to love one another, no matter which team wins the game. And, take heart... you possess the knowledge that it’s fine to take part in America’s biggest one-evening religious event... just be sure that others who are with you can detect by your actions just exactly where true love and true worship truly are found. Amen.