

Not a Stumbling Block

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

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Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Love. It’s all about love. It’s all about love as the most important attribute, the most important attitude. It’s all about love over knowledge, about bridges being built instead of walls, about a voice speaking for unity rather than spewing arrogance. Paul’s words are about food, but his lesson is about meeting people where they are. He is gentle and understanding rather than forceful as he uses his knowledge to teach the pagan believers of many gods about the One God and the love of Jesus Christ. Jesus cried out to the demon tormenting a stranger, and he loved this man enough to release him from his agony. We see that love is not just thoughts and words but

must be translated into acts and actions and in community. Jesus and Paul are clear- the world knows God through love.

How easy it would have been for Paul to confront the people around him with his superior, insider knowledge. He could have downplayed the importance of the idols to their belief as no idols in the world really exist, he could have scoffed at their food sacrifices, or he could have pushed the message of Jesus on them in a way that made his point but did not reflect the gospel he wanted to share with them. He knew that ‘knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,’ so that what is permitted may not be beneficial.

The demon who recognized Jesus as the Holy One of God before most people could acknowledge that truth, could struggle, scream and resist but in the end could only surrender and obey when faced with the loving authority of Jesus. The Scribes and the Pharisees challenged Jesus’ authority. He did not respond with words of anger or condemnation but instead with a loving act of healing and teaching. And from that his fame, and often his welcome, continued to grow.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Love over knowledge is what matters most. It mattered to the healing of a man ensnared by a demon, just as it mattered to the Scribes and Pharisees and the crowds who heard this remarkable new teacher. It mattered to the newest Christians that Paul was mentoring, just as it mattered to the pagans that Paul was introducing to Jesus. And it matters to us. How we hear and receive lessons or news, or feedback matters that it comes from a place of love over knowledge. We can hear even the less welcome words if they come from a voice of love. We can speak even the harder, the more difficult words, to others when they came from a place of love.

Knowledge without love is a stumbling block to the weak, an obstacle to the powerless, a barrier to the beginner. It creates hardships, miscommunication and delays. It can create demons between us. It is love, compassion, conscious effort and patience that create a wide open path. We want to provide building blocks and stepping stones to offer a path that is open, welcoming and inclusive and so we take steps—sometimes small, others a big leap—to meet people where they are. We live out the many faith lessons of living in harmony, of not being wise in our own sight, and bearing one another up in love, but what about when that creates a stumbling block against ourselves? How do we balance building up others in love while also not conforming to this world as Paul taught? How do we balance building up others in love while also not selling out on our values and beliefs? If we go along just to get along we can all too easily compromise what matters the most to us. We shift our priorities until we stumble, falter, slip and maybe even fall.

The first time I really remember struggling with this question was when my son’s new Little League baseball coach scheduled practices for Sunday mornings at 10 a.m. I told him that we have church and Sunday school at that time. This turned into quite a conversation with more pushback and resistance from the coach than I would have anticipated, but I held my ground, and drew the proverbial line in the sand. Over the course of the season Justin did get less playing time in the games because he missed much of the practice time on Sundays, but he also went to church and Sunday school—dressed for baseball practice of course—and he sang in the children’s choir and served as an acolyte. We balanced both worlds for what was important and of value to the coach and what was not a stumbling block for us, and to our faith beliefs.

Setting a faith foundation for his life was the line in the sand we drew over the fun and lifelong skills from playing a team sport.

We all have this experience in one way or another, these decisions to be made, in ways that are merely a slip over a pebble as lifestyle opportunities and options come up, as well as those that are a stumble over a roadblock as ethical or medical decisions need to be made.

Several years ago I was the hospice chaplain for a woman who was nearing the end stage of Alzheimer's disease. She was a Christian Scientist so declined any form of medication throughout her life as illness is believed to be an illusion that can be healed by prayer alone. Very early on in her dementia journey, she and her husband, after quite a bit of prayer, consideration and education on the disease process, chose to allow her to receive medication when she had progressed far enough that she could no longer understand this theology and practice. Either way, they made a controversial decision. For their family members who were not practicing this faith any longer, they were relieved that she would spend the very end of her life with comforts. For many in her congregation there was anger that such a central tenet of their faith was being overridden. Either way their decision to accept or decline medication would be a stumbling block to others. In their decision they placed love—a husband's love for his wife, a woman's love for her family—over the knowledge of their faith tradition.

Jesus' first dramatic healing and teaching in the synagogue with the authority of love points us to resolving our own stumbling blocks. How do we hear the authority of Jesus in our decision making? For those gathered in the synagogue that day, they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. The scribes taught by referencing different rabbis' authority in ways that we would call name dropping, or as we would reference a book in our teaching, but Jesus did not. When Jesus spoke the highest authority he could appeal to was himself. The fact that he did not name-drop was what was so striking to those who listened to Jesus speak and teach.

When we are at risk of setting up a stumbling block in our own path, we are reminded that Jesus teaches us the way things are is not the way things have to be. Jesus lovingly frees us from the demon that has a hold on us. Amen.