

The First Presbyterian Church

Charlotte, North Carolina

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“Stumble”

I Corinthians 8

I am a clumsy person. I'm not proud of this fact, but it is true. I have been known to trip over my own two feet and down stairs, to bump into doors, walls, and various pieces of furniture. I've even tripped coming out of this pulpit. I knock things over without meaning to, and more than once, I've stuck a hand or an arm in a sticky mess on a table. I'm clumsy, and it's embarrassing. I would like to be more graceful, less apt to stumble, and I can go for periods of time being just that, but eventually, it always comes back, my clumsiness.

It's a part of me, for some reason, and so I should embrace it, I suppose, but that's hard to do. Maybe that's because anytime I stumbled or fell as a little girl, other people laughed. Maybe it's because it is out of my control- I certainly don't mean to be clumsy. I don't know. What I do know is that I- like most people, I imagine- don't like to stumble.

I can't help but think of all of that when I reflect upon this morning's scripture passage. Speaking about an issue deeply important to the people of 1st century Corinth, Paul uses the image of a stumbling block to educate fellow Christians in an important practice of faith. For me, and perhaps for you, it's a powerful image.

The Christians in Corinth had written to Paul wanting to know whether it really mattered whether or not they ate the meat that was leftover after the ritual animal sacrifices in the local pagan temples. The mature believers knew, because they trusted in the sovereignty of God, that the pagan ritual held no sway over them or the meat, and that meat was really just like any other meat. They were secure in their knowledge, and so didn't see the big deal in enjoying a nice meal that just so happened to have come through a practice that was antithetical to their faith.

Paul affirms this, using words the Corinthians were very familiar with- “no idol in the world really exists,” and “there is no God but One.” Because of this foundation of our faith, any earthly activity related to idols is ultimately empty of meaning. The “many gods and many lords” to which he refers have no real power in the face of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus Christ.

So, Paul says in effect, you are right- eating idol meat is no big deal.

However, that's not the end of the story. Sure, the mature believers get it, and good for them. But they're not the only people in the picture. There are others, newer to the faith, many of whom have come from pagan backgrounds, who are not as firm in their faith. For them, the practice of eating the sacrificial meat could be a problem. When it comes to the faith, they're clumsy, and even something as seemingly benign as the eating of meat sacrificed to powerless idols could cause them to stumble.

Paul stresses that it is important for those in the know to be extra sure that their actions don't confuse or cause problems for people who may not know as much. If, in their advanced knowledge of theology, they act in a way that is confusing and troublesome for new believers, then their knowledge ceases to be an asset and quickly becomes a detriment.

The issue of idol meat has little to no bearing on our lives today. But the issue Paul is truly addressing is as pertinent today as it was 2,000 years ago. There are idols everywhere we look. They may not be statues, and they may not demand animal sacrifice, but they certainly demand our attention, and sometimes they cause us to stumble.

We idolize things- cars, houses, clothes, electronics. We idolize concepts- youth, virility, power, influence. And above all of this, I think, we idolize knowledge. We have come to believe that what we know somehow gives us our identity, and so we cultivate it, we cherish it, we even go so far as to worship it. Whether it is our knowledge of matters of faith or politics, of economics or child-rearing, of interpersonal relationships or cultural norms, we live in a society that tells us- and we believe it- that the knowledge we possess makes us important. Like the first century Corinthians, we are confident in what we know- and want everyone else to know it.

Like most things that become idols in our lives, knowledge itself is not a bad thing. It is, in fact, a very good thing, a thing to be celebrated. Education is a cornerstone of our Christian ministry as Presbyterians, as we will celebrate in just a few minutes as we recognize our fourth graders who have been on a great journey in their faith education through the Catechism process.

Increasing our knowledge about all things- including our faith- is good. It is an important part of discipleship, as the more we learn about our faith, the deeper and more meaningful it can become.

But, like most things, if we give our knowledge too much focus, it can take on a power it does not deserve. When we begin to believe that what we know is truer and more right than what others know, and we use our knowledge- about issues, about ideas, even about beliefs- as a weapon to beat into submission those who would dare disagree with us, we make of that

knowledge an idol. We get all puffed up with our own rightness and we forget about what really matters.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

This is Paul's response to the Corinthian Christians' assertion that they possess knowledge. Kind of a pin in their balloon, don't you think? There they were, all proud that they knew something so deeply theological and scripturally grounded, ready to put that knowledge to use and have a big old feast on scrumptious idol meat. But Paul puts on the brakes.

You might have the facts straight, Paul says, but you're missing the point.

As one of my favorite seminary professors used to say, paraphrasing I Corinthians 13, you can be super smart and have all your theological and biblical ducks in a row, but if you do not act with love towards the people you encounter- all of them, none of that great knowledge matters a bit.

If what you know causes you to do or to say something that causes someone else to stumble, then what is your knowledge worth? If your knowledge only serves to puff you up, what good is it? If you comfort yourself with thoughts like, "This is the only faithful way to see this issue" or "No real Christian would ever do that," "I can't have a conversation with someone who actually thinks that," or "How can she do that and call herself a Christian?" then you are skating dangerously close to allowing your knowledge to trump your love. As funny as it sounds, when it comes to living faithfully with all God's children, you can be right and also be very wrong.

Like the early Christians in Corinth, we are called into community to worship, learn about, and serve God, and it's not always easy. We have differing ideas about just about everything- from which hymns we should sing to what we should wear to worship to who deserves to stand in this pulpit or serve communion. We are individuals with God-given brains and opinions, and we are not always going to agree. That is uncomfortable, but it is okay. There are countless places for us to disagree, and one point of common faith we all confess.

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus didn't say, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and make your neighbor think as you think." He said we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Knowledge is not the road to salvation. It is a gift, and a valuable one, but it is not the end to which we are to strive. When knowledge begins to puff us up, we need to be careful. When we are so obsessed with what we know that we value our the validity of our opinions over the humanity of another person, then we erect stumbling blocks that can turn out to be bigger than we could ever imagine.

I am lucky to have some people in my life who know all too well about my clumsiness, and so they take measures from time to time to protect me from my awkward ways. Seeing potential stumbling blocks before I do, they point out steps or guide me away from large objects, they grab my arm when I'm unknowingly about to stick it in something gross, or move delicate items out of my reach lest I swat them to the floor in an absentminded gesture. While sometimes I don't love being reminded of my clumsiness, I am nevertheless very grateful for this, as it no doubt saves me from embarrassment and possible injury.

And I can't help but think that, seeing what I do not see, and wanting me not to stumble; they are doing just what Paul is calling the Corinthians- and all of us- to do.