

I know it's true (I saw it on the internet)

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-29

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

What's an omnivore to do without refrigeration? Throughout biblical times, meat was prized but precious, not daily fare. On special occasions, people offered animal sacrifices to their gods and were allowed a portion for themselves, to eat or to sell. Israelites since Moses' time had done the same. One of the theological battles raging in first century Christianity was whether a person was condemned for eating meat offered to other gods. Paul insists that whatever you think you "know," tenderness toward your fellow Christians should guide your behavior.

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. "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 [to eat meat offered to idols] 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

Jesus has just called as disciples the two pairs of brothers, Andrew and Simon (renamed Peter), and James and John. All of them fished in the Sea of Galilee, but left nets, boats and even families to follow Jesus. Today, he preaches for the first time as recorded in Mark. Capernaum lies on the north shore of the Sea. They went to Capernaum; and (immediately) 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 (immediately) 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 (immediately) his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

What is authority? Is it the same as power? Who has it and how do they get it? Twice Mark reports that people in the synagogue said Jesus' teaching had authority. What did that mean? Does Jesus' teaching still carry authority for us, today?

These days, it sometimes seems as though the internet has absolute authority over our lives. It's the source of all information, a lot of it contradictory. It's quite perplexing and even troubling, when my "facts" don't line up with my neighbor's "facts," or my in-laws' "facts," or those other people's "facts." Who gets the last word?

For now, let's leave the problematic realm of the internet and consider something very different: music. Years ago, I taught piano to beginners. Beginners were all I was prepared to teach! One of my favorite students was Neil. Well, they were all my favorites, in different ways. Neil was eight or so when he begged his parents for lessons. But it's a big hurdle to go from seeing funny squiggles on a page to pushing down the right key with the right finger to make music. Add in counting time, and the hurdle is almost insurmountable for some kids. Neil was one of those. At his fourth or fifth lesson, I'd asked him to practice a two-line, three-note, three-finger song. Each note was an agony. His brow wrinkled, he frowned and bit his tongue; his fingers moved like wooden sticks. Timing? Forget it. Just get through the next note. When he finally finished he let out a long sigh. "That was hard, wasn't it?" I asked. "*Darn* hard," he agreed.

Why I loved Neil, though, was because he persisted and because he loved music. He learned his notes, he learned to count, his fingers moved more fluidly. Translating from the page to the piano was never really easy; he developed his own method of playing: he called it "rememberizing," a compromise between reading the music and remembering how to make it happen. Eventually he started composing his own haunting little melodies, with here and there a chord. He couldn't wait to play them for me. All I did was encourage him to keep loving music and keep playing. He touched me in a way that more advanced students who just played the right notes did not.

But listen to someone like Glenna or Judy Kereakos, or Thelonius Monk, who was famous for his jazz improvisations. They touch the keyboard, and something amazing pours out. There's almost a oneness between instrument and player. There's an *authority* there that is unmistakable: we think, "Wow, this person really knows what they're doing." Their authority is not just confidence and it's not just practice; it's not just *knowing*; it's a combination of knowledge, wisdom, truth, and love. That's what I think authority is.

They know each note and they know it intimately. But knowledge alone can yield boring playing: notes without music. Wisdom goes farther: judicious musicians linger on phrases, or press forward without breaking tempo; they stroke the keys, or strike them. Wisdom's decisions flow from experienced musicianship. Truth is harder. Would you agree if I said that really good music, whatever the genre, carries its own internal witness to something bigger than life, bigger

than any single piece or performance? Great music evokes something universal in the listener--sadness, tenderness, peace, joy. It's the authority of a truth bigger than notes--or life.

But what about the authority of love? This is what Neil and Glenna have in common, despite the vast difference in proficiency. This is where the piano and the player, the singer and the song, become one. Love unites, draws things together, surmounts obstacles. The authority of love is irrefutable and irresistible in music and in life; you cannot deny its effect.

So what does all this have to do with Jesus in the synagogue, doing his first miracle? What surprised them so? The scribes were not bad teachers; they were excellent at what they did! But like the cartoon on the front of the bulletin says, they used a lot of footnotes. They had a lot of knowledge. They could argue fine points of law endlessly, quoting sources--often contradictory ones--and citing precedent. I think they tried to use their knowledge wisely, judiciously, to do no harm. But maybe sometimes this did no good, either. Something was lacking in their authority.

Jesus' knowledge came from his direct connection with God, through prayer; they were one. His observation of people gave him the wisdom to know when to speak gently and when to rebuke. He saw truth in context, the big picture: he saw that this man suffered from a spirit of impurity that kept him and others apart from God. But even the unclean spirit saw the truth in Jesus: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God," it screamed. The hateful truth living in the sick man recognized the holy truth living in Jesus. Sadly, things that are factually true can divide and harm as well as reveal and heal. Jesus had the healing kind of truth in abundance. Truth in music is more than knowledge of notes; truth in life is more than knowledge of facts.

But what was the authority that conquered the impure spirit? It was the authority of love. Jesus' unique authority came from the power of love, a power that flows from the heart of God, the author of love. It's not power *over*, it's power within, alongside, and underneath. Jesus couldn't bear to see this poor human being divided from his Creator by the hatefulness that had parked itself inside him. The authority of love commanded the spirit to leave. It had to obey.

For some people, accumulating knowledge is easy, but using it for good never quite happens. Paul warned against those who used their knowledge to inflate their own egos at the expense of others' well-being. "Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up," he said. Others struggle so hard to learn to play the very simplest notes of life with others. Learning how to get along on the most basic level can be hard--*darn* hard. We forget that we all have access to the authority of love, no matter where we are on the knowledge or proficiency spectrum.

Jesus built up his followers and triumphed over his opponents not by brute force, superior knowledge, or even persuasive logic, but by letting the fear and distrust they felt play itself out to its lethal conclusion. His arrest, his trumped up trial, his death on the cross, may have appeared

momentarily to be loss, but triumphed in the end: the authority of love won forever over the power of fear and division. Who has the last word? Love does. Love wins. Always.

God speaks to you today with the same authority that amazed the people of Capernaum: God knows you, knows everything about you, knows you better than you know yourself; God's wisdom greets you with the gentleness or the sternness you most need; God's truth shows you the world as it is--and as it could be; God's love casts out, sends packing whatever is in you that keeps you apart from God. It reveals and heals at once.

What authority do you claim? Where did you get your facts? It's not enough to say, "I know it's true; I saw it on the internet." Any reference librarian worth her salt will urge you: check your sources! And any preacher worthy of the name will tell you the same: check your sources. Are your beliefs and actions rooted and grounded in love, in a desire for the good of the Other? No matter how slight your experience, or how simple your wisdom, you can see the effects of your brand of truth. It's more than notes, more than facts. Does your truth divide or unite? Does it puff *you* up or build *others* up, does it promote fear or aim for understanding? Does it seek power over others, or power alongside, power lifting from below?

Here's the good news: we, here, at Community Presbyterian Church, have access to the ultimate truth and authority of love. We can promote understanding in our community and our world. We can "try and see what love will do." We can do it one by one, but we can do it so much better together, working through differences, if and when they arise. We can claim, as children of God in one family of faith, the words Jesus speaks to us and use them for good. And when we do, the world may be amazed! Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

Great God, source and author of love, thank you for leading us to this day. May we find our truth, our strength, and our hope in you. You have put peace into our hands to savor and to share: show us how best to do this. Your love, the love of Christ, has brought us together here in this place and this time for a reason. We long to know more of your purposes, so that we may follow your will more nearly and live in harmony with it.

We pray for peaceful relations among nations and within our nation: may we cultivate relationships founded on concern for the other, for the disadvantaged, for the vulnerable among us. May we find our way to caring for one another, whether this is medical care, care for those burdened by mental illness, or those made invisible and inaudible to wider society by the color of their skin or their economic status.

For those who have lost friends and family to death, we pray for your comfort; each one is precious in your sight. As Jesus taught us, so we now pray. *Our Father who art in heaven...*