

Epiphany IV (B)  
*Deuteronomy 18.15-22/I Corinthians 8.1-13/Mark 1.21-28*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
1 February 2009

~Paul H. Friesen~

Last Sunday we talked about St. Paul's conversion, and thought about our own conversion. This week the Scriptures urge us to think and talk about 'life after conversion'—in particular about how our life is entangled with the lives of the rest of the converted, that is the members of the church.

In the religious world in which I grew up this involved a concept called the 'weaker brother'. In case you've never heard about this, it works this way. As Christians we're obligated to ask ourselves a question whenever we enter an uncertain situation. This was the question: Is it possible that my actions in this situation will offend some other Christian? If so, I should completely avoid the questionable thing.

It was meant to be a theoretical question applicable in many situations, but in practice it was fairly narrow. Should I enjoy a glass of wine? Should I go to a dance? Should I wash the family car on a Sunday? Should I enter a movie theatre?

Questions like these were taken quite seriously. I can remember the relief of one family I knew when video machines were invented—they could watch a genuinely good movie without entering a movie theatre!

The concern was with offence. It might be hard to imagine, but all these things were seen as potentially offensive.

So the answer of course, in that religious world, was always 'no'. There would always be a 'weaker brother'. It was not a hard question, in the end, especially since that world was very small. No one thought what would happen if our world included the world-wide church, and how it would be impossible to do much more than breathe without offending someone.

To live our Christian lives always looking over our shoulder to see if someone in some church might be offended by some practice is of course, wrong-headed. And it's not what conversion by the Gospel of Christ is all about. And yet...

And yet, there was something that religious world was recalling, that we shouldn't let go of—the idea that we can't live with a clear conscience if we don't live as part of a Christian body whose lives are tangled together for the common good, no matter how much we might try to avoid each other.

Today's Epistle and Gospel are about *knowledge* and *love*, and what we do with them.

In the Gospel story Jesus meets a man possessed by what is called 'an unclean spirit'. The line between psychiatry and spirituality is generally vague, and it is here too. The tormented character of the man, or one of his personalities, or the thing possessing him claims 'knowledge': 'I know who you are, the Holy one of God.'

And in the Gospel story Jesus replies—but not by saying that the man's knowledge is praiseworthy.

Jesus replies saying, in effect, that the man doesn't know him at all, but that Jesus knows the man, and is therefore able to heal the man.

In the Epistle, St. Paul is blunt: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.' The Apostle isn't downgrading the Christian mind and saying feelings are all that matters. His words require a lot of thought if we are going to take them to heart. And he warns us often about how fickle, how unreliable religious feelings often are.

But the Apostle does warn us against applying theoretical knowledge against an actual person—instead he urges us to approach others with what might be called 'loving knowledge'—a love that learns from others, rather than a presumptuous, incomplete knowledge of what others are all about.

There are in fact two good questions to ask ourselves, when it comes to the 'weaker brother or sister'.

*First, God knows me: do I really know that fellow Christian I have pegged as such and such? Second, I have been converted by Christ's love: how can I live in such a way to include those I am coming to know?*

*So, first, God knows me: do I really know that fellow Christian I have pegged as such and such?*

When we turn to our Epistle we step into a complex world of idolatry and into a complicated church situation.

Evidently a number of the converts in the church had previously worshipped in the pagan shrines that filled the streets of Corinth. And the reality was that much of the food for sale in the markets of the city routinely passed through one or another of these shrines and through various widely accepted pagan rites. One couldn't know if a particular purchase of meat had been through one of these rites on its way to the market.

Likewise anyone could attend the equivalent of a church supper in some of the temples along the streets of Corinth, amidst the idols, the statues of gods. Some of the converts had a crisis: they still associated actual demonic power to the buildings and to the food that had passed through their doors on the way to

being sold.<sup>1</sup> Were they denying Christ and the church by eating such food in such places?

What St. Paul said was—of course there is only one true God, and statues of gods are just chunks of stone, and of course by conversion we have been liberated from superstition about the power of any other spiritual force. But what are you doing, he asks folks in the Corinthian church, when you flaunt this knowledge in the face of someone recovering, through conversion to Christ, from this fear?

It would be like asking a recovering alcoholic to join you in a pub crawl—innocent in theory—because alcohol was good in itself, a gift of God, and needn't be abused—all true. All true, but all useless in this situation. Knowledge 'puffs up', said St. Paul, but love 'builds up'.

As the Protestant Reformer, John Colet, put it about these verses: 'In love of God is contained love of neighbour... without which nothing can be done rightly, and with which nothing can be done amiss...Knowledge inflates while charity builds.'<sup>2</sup> And charity (love) builds a parish.

I have been surprised by how little I know people in the course of my parish work, and how wrong my assumptions might be about others. And I have experienced—can I say it—a little shock at how little others might know those they peg as such and such.

And I have been delighted to experience and to see the joy of the truer, deeper knowledge of someone who was thought to be 'known'.

St. Paul said, 'Anyone who loves God is known *by* him'. Part of the blessing of conversion is that we know God truly knows us and yet still loves us. The sting of fear has been removed. This true loving knowledge of others rests in our own experience of being known by God.

*God knows me: do I really know that fellow Christian I have pegged as such and such?* Conversion, through Christ's love is what opens us up to the true knowledge of those around us.

*Second, I have been converted by Christ's love: how can I live in such a way to include those I am coming to know?*

I'm not going to suggest the approach taken in that religious world in which one is always looking over her shoulder to see if she is offending someone who is always looking for something to be offended about.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), p.188-194.

<sup>2</sup> *John Colet's Commentary on First Corinthians*, ed. Bernard O'Kelly and Catherine Jarrott (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1985), p.201.

The Apostle uses some pretty strong words to describe some pretty hard consequences of careless Christian living. There are four: causing to stumble, causing to fall, wounding, and destroying. He sums it up with this: ‘When you thus sin against members of your family (the church) ...you sin against Christ.’ This is nothing to sneeze at.

We are all part of one body of the converted, though we come from a hundred different directions. We need to live as if this were true, because it is true. ‘It is the height of folly,’ said St. John Chrysostom, ‘if we regard those who are so precious to Christ that he chose to die for them as insignificant.’<sup>3</sup>

I’m not suggesting a new church policy here, in which we would take votes so that the number of those pained or the depth of pain of those most wounded by a certain decision on the budget, or by the moving of church furnishings, or by a worship practice in the ‘other’ liturgy—I’m not suggesting that such an impossible calculation would trump the proper decision making process or the agreed to delegation of responsibility and authority.

But St. Paul is urging us to live in such a way that includes those we live next to, in Christ, at the Lord’s Table, and church lunches, and committee meeting, and at coffee—and maybe even outside of church events!

To live this way is to live as if we were known by God and loved by Christ, and to live as if we didn’t yet know those around us but could, and could be changed by them for the good. This is the opposite of living as if we knew exactly what other folks were like—‘knowledge’ that puffs up, as we heard, unreal knowledge, arrogant knowledge.

But what surprises, what delights for us as a parish as we live with a desire to know those new to us and those we thought we knew, and to be changed by each other through knowing each other’s sorrows, and failings, and the converting work of Christ in both of us.

This charitable knowing isn’t something we can schedule or mandate or make each other feel guilty about. But we all have plenty of opportunities to take up this life after conversion.

And we begin this again, this Sunday, with the converting experience of confessing a shared faith, and praying for each other’s good, and confessing our sins, and celebrating the reviving work of Christ in the world at the Lord’s table.

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<sup>3</sup> In *I Corinthians: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, ed. Judith L. Kovacs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p.140.

We begin here, and then we live as those 'known by God', and awaiting the true knowledge of each other. Thanks be to God for the love of God at the Table and amongst us. Amen.