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## *So, You Think You Are in the Know?*

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**A Sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton**  
**Epiphany 4 B**  
**I Corinthians 8:1-13**

The woman arrived at the Green Bough Retreat Center for the first time. I saw her exit her car from the guest house porch. At first blush she seemed to have little knowledge of the place and entered it with all the grace of a bull in a china shop. She must have sensed the deep welcome and hospitality instantly, because she was quick to vocalize her own needs and desires and enact them without hesitation.

She was the kind of first time visitor I often view with skepticism. If I am really truthful, it is probably a feeling closer to wariness or simple irritation. After so many years of coming to a place, I rely upon the known. It as if the unknown mysteries can best be revealed within a very circumscribed set of routines. I do not need to be distracted with worry about when the meals will be served, where the snacks are kept, or when we will gather for prayer.

Through the years I have prayed in particular places, in particular ways, with particular passages of scripture. There are visual reminders all around the place of my insights and revelations, my laughter and my tears. I see faces of fellow travelers who have accompanied me on my journey whether they happen to be there that visit or not. The wonder of the place is that it feels as comfortable as a favorite pair of jeans or an old worn pair of shoes.

This visitor, (note I call her a visitor), while friendly, challenged me a number of times during our shared retreat. We were there on the eve of the sabbath, so she wanted to share with us her family tradition of welcoming the sabbath. It was beautiful. But I felt disoriented when the tattered notecard containing the community's usual sabbath prayer stayed anchored firmly under the placemat of one of the full time residents, presumably until the following week.

At night prayer, usually a 15 minute office at the max, the woman arrived bearing a sizable wooden box. She deposited it on the altar and began her narrative. In it she had carried enough consecrated sacrament from her Roman Catholic priest to get her through the length of her retreat and then some. She explained to us that she had not known there would be holy Eucharist available at Green Bough.

Now, she found herself overwhelmed with an abundance. She felt the only way to give thanks for this gift, was to share it with each one of us. She produced a Roman Catholic missal and commenced with the service. While familiar in its structure, I found myself with a very unflattering silent commentary accompanying this holy meal. I kept wishing someone in authority would jump to their feet and call a halt to this madness. Who did she think she was? Didn't she know anything?

"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."

Saint Paul cautions us against that all too familiar human habit of creating idols out of the known. We revere the comfort of our favorite jeans and the worn old shoe. We honor their companionship of us along the journey. But, God has a funny way of allowing the seams to rip unexpectedly, exposing parts of ourselves we'd rather not see. The old comfortable shoes suddenly reveal a hole in a puddle, and you find yourself squishing audibly in cold damp socks. You are exposed and uncomfortable.

In those moments of exposure we have a choice. Do we rebel against the intrusion on our personal comfort? Throw them in the trash and buy new ones? Or do we take the risk to adjust to the new reality, vulnerable as it may feel.

"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."

St. Paul is writing in response to a number of issues the Corinthians have raised with him. They have sought his advice and are awaiting his reply. But they sure don't get the answer they were angling for. Unfortunately for the Corinthians, while they were asking for advice, they really already thought they knew the answers. The question was submitted with all the confidence of eager children ready to receive the easy praise of their founder. Their exalted view of themselves as experienced enlightened members of their community had colored their view and blinded them. They couldn't wait for Daddy to uphold their side of the argument and quiet those who were clearly inferior. The thought that their "knowledgeable" behavior might be destructive and divisive, had clearly never occurred to them.

To go to the temple and eat idol meat was to put on a public display. It did not necessarily include a religious ritual. There were many other sections to the compound, so public gatherings other than worship were not uncommon. It was a gathering place and the food that had been sacrificed was put to good use. Frankly, not just anyone would have been invited to those parties. They were for the powerful and rich in the community.

I have to wonder if this presented a temptation to the more affluent member of the church in Corinth. If you were in that elite group, it sure would be nice to be able to justify your ongoing participation from a religious standpoint. The fact that not everyone in your Christian community could attend wasn't your fault. Shouldn't you leverage your position so you could share your enlightenment with others?

Instead of praise, Paul calls them on the carpet. He reminds them that any knowledge they think they have, must always be tested against the greater value of love.

Which raises the question. So how do you know you are loving? Paul says throughout this epistle, look around you. How is the community faring? Is it growing? Is it healthy? Is it a place where those new to the faith can be supported in their practices or will they feel like second class citizens or unwelcome visitors? The true elite of the community he tells them is not the ones with the best jobs or resumes, but the one who is most able to identify the needs of the community and its members as a whole.

We recently celebrated the life and witness of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. As a child born in late 1968 and reared in Maryland and Michigan, most of what I knew about him before seminary was from civics class. I knew he was an important leader and I probably could have quoted some of the "I have a dream" speech to you. I had no awareness of him as a preacher who was firmly set within a community of faith. As we so often do in our culture, he had been elevated to such individual heights that it was hard to imagine his broader context.

As I listened to and read his sermons in seminary, I realized I had missed one of the most important parts of his witness. He was about mobilizing and building up community through love. His commitment to non-violent resistance was grounded in Love. What I thought I "knew" of him was missing the lens of love that Paul calls us to use when we view the world.

Recently there has been some controversy around the memorial erected in Washington D.C. to honor Dr. King. It contains etched in stone in large letters a quotation from one of his sermons. It says, "I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness." Five months ago, Washington Post staffer Rachel Manteuffel wrote that there was something about that quotation that bothered her. Rather than honoring him it made him sound like an "arrogant jerk." It turns out the quote

had indeed been edited by the architects.

The quote's source is from Dr. King's sermon entitled the "Drum Major Instinct." In it he cautions us modern day Corinthians from operating with unbridled desire for recognition. By struggling to be out front we can fall into the trap of separating ourselves through envy and excess. We believe our knowledge makes us superior to others and that is death to the upbuilding of any community.

So looking to the arc of his own life he says, "If you must call me a drum major, call me a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness." The government this week decided that indeed this first clause was essential to capturing the essence of Dr. King and has ordered it changed, no small task on large engraved stone.

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As God would have it I have had several subsequent occasions to share retreat space with the woman who so beautifully tore me out of my comfort zone. The second time I met her she came to me with a beautifully open smile and embraced me warmly. She said, "You were here with me the first time I came here, weren't you?" "I felt such a connection of love with you."

Amen