

“Freedom and Kindness”
 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
 January 31, 2021
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Are freedom and kindness two completely different things?

Or are they connected in some way?

Freedom - - - and kindness.

Think of each one separately for a second...

Freedom... Kindness...

Now think of them together.

According to Paul - - they are connected - - to the point that they can't be separated.

Paul says the same thing about LOVE - - and KNOWLEDGE.

So try the same exercise: think of LOVE... and then KNOWLEDGE... now together

“Love and knowledge, love and knowledge...go together like...”

Well, knowledge doesn't rhyme with carriage or marriage.

And I don't have a substitute rhyme... but you get the idea.

Most people over 40 years old or so probably know the song “Love and Marriage” from the 70s sitcom with Christina Applegate and Ed O'Neill as Al Bundy, titled after the song. / But if you are over 60 or so you might also know that the song originated with the 1950s television production of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. / It was most famously sung by Frank Sinatra.

Our Town is about the imaginary town of Grover's Corners.

Supposedly the classic American small town.

It starts out nice enough but by act three lots of people die.

Act three begins at a cemetery.

Where George kneels at the grave of his wife who died in childbirth.

Life is complicated it turns out.

And so is love.

For Paul in the Bible - - however - - love is still at the heart of the matter.

Love and kindness - - are the root of the behavior of a follower of Jesus.

Love and kindness - - are the starting point - - for knowledge and for freedom.

“Love and kindness, love and kindness...”

That’s what Paul says in the Bible.

So let’s look more closely at what Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians, chapter 8.

According to Paul in the Bible, “knowledge puffs up but love builds up.”

And Freedom is not a right - - it is a gift.

Freedom is given for the purpose of building each other up.

That’s what the Bible says.

I’m not sure that as I look at the current behavior of people in our culture, both Christians and otherwise, it is at all clear to me that they or that we have read this text and taken it in.

“Knowledge puffs up and love builds up” is what Paul says.

But what does it mean to be puffed up by knowledge?

Ben Franklin said centuries ago that he once knew a man - - who could say the word “horse” in 10 different languages - - but - - he bought a cow to ride on.

Sometimes knowing a lot - - is not knowledge - - or at least not wisdom.

And it certainly doesn’t always get used in a loving way.

But - - what is the loving thing to do - - when you KNOW something bad has been done?

What is the loving way to hold someone accountable - - for using their knowledge to hurt someone else? / These are the difficult and important questions from the Biblical text for today.

And the same questions apply to freedom.

Our freedom should not be exercised in a way that hurts other people.

According to Paul the freedom we know as followers of Christ should build others up.

We are set free from sin and death by Christ.

As a gift.

And our gift makes our freedom - - properly exercised - -

- - inseparable from kindness.

We are freed - - to be kind.

We are NOT free - - to hurt others or say or do anything we want.

At least that is what the Bible says about it.

So how can we respond?

How can we live our lives in response to these - - challenging words?

We live in a world that is more like Act 3 - - of Our Town.

People die, and there are tragedies and disagreements.

There is violence and fear.

So how can we act in a loving, kind, way...

Using our knowledge and freedom - - to build up?

One thing that gets in the way of acting the way Paul describes, I think, is our way of seeing things, or what we think we know. / Fredrick Buechner talked about the difficulty of believing in a sermon decades ago.

He referred to a situation in which a BIRD CAGE was rigged so that the perch swung back and forth. / A recorded sound of a bird was also played nearby. / But the thing was - - there was NO BIRD in the cage. / A series of people was asked to walk by and then later to describe what they saw. / In almost every case - - people claimed to have seen a bird.

One person even described the yellow beak!

They saw what their knowledge told them to see.

And they missed seeing the truth.

Do we ever misunderstand because of what we assume we know?

And how does that effect how we act in response?

Grief is another factor in this I think.

In “Shadowlands”, and “A Grief Observed”, C. S. Lewis wrote about the death of his wife Joy. / She died of cancer and this brilliant creative writer - - who had become a profound Christian thinker - - described losing his faith. / He wrote movingly about his anger at God.

Writing about pain and God is one thing.

Living through it and experiencing it is another.

Lectures on pain - - are different from living through pain.

SO to answer my previous question:

How can we act in a loving and kind way?

And - - what gets in the way - - and stops us from doing that?

Our pain - - and our perceptions.

Our pains and our misperceptions are powerful.

What we think we know.

Our perceived right to freedom.

Paul's writing in the Bible is a reminder:

Our freedom is a gift to be used in kindness to others.

Real knowledge - - IS loving.

And in what might be Paul's most challenging word today, he wrote:

“To love God - - is to be known BY God.”

Instead of focusing on what WE know...

Paul encourages us to focus on being KNOWN by God.

When we do - - that will transcend everything else.

Maybe this week we could try this:

Sit down and make a list of all the ways we could work to build up the world.

How could we build up someone in our lives?

Is there someone in your life that you want to encourage.

Doing these things can NOT be a way to avoid difficult truths.

It is not about letting violence go unchecked.

It IS about - - seeing beyond this present moment.

I think Paul's words from chapter 8 put life in a more eternal perspective.

Maybe that will help us live in the immediate moment more fully.

Nevertheless these are still difficult words for me from Paul in the Bible.

And I think one of my struggles has to do with a difference:

There is a difference between people pledged to support one another...

...on the one hand...

And on the other hand, everyone in the great big world out there.

Paul was writing to a community of believers who had made a promise to each other.

It is one thing if we live together in a covenant, and another if we do not.

Paul is quite clear that believers not compromise with evil in the world.

Nor acquiesce to those in power or those who do not follow God.

So when it comes to marriage, family, church or nation what do we have?

We make promises to spouses and family.

We make promises to other members of a church community.

What about the nation and our role as citizens?

In what sense do we have a commitment to other citizens, as citizens?

And to what extent has that connection - - broken down lately?

Love and knowledge go together.

Freedom and kindness go together.

As the song says: "try, try, try to separate them, it's an illusion"

Is there a sense that we have given in to some illusions?

Is our unity as people - - in any way - - an illusion?

And how can we return - - to a world of love and kindness?

The way Paul suggests is to keep our knowledge connected to love.

And to keep our freedom connected to kindness.

And to remember - - that more important than what we KNOW - -

- - is that we are KNOWN - - by God.

According to Paul - - only that - - is true love.