

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Knowledge and Love”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 4--January 28, 2018

Lessons: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. My friend Gene McAfee, whom I hope you’ll have the opportunity to meet someday, is a minister in Ohio. We were at Yale together, but Gene went on after divinity school to earn a Doctor of Theology degree at Harvard, which required him to become a far better expert in ancient languages and theology than I will ever be. Some years ago Gene wrote: “Knowledge and its acquisition through learning are very important to me and always have been. When other kids were playing house or cowboys and Indians, I was playing school with whichever of my friends would sit still long enough as pupils to let me be the teacher. For my seventh or eighth birthday, I didn’t ask for a bike; I asked for a typewriter, and my career as a wordsmith began to bud.”¹

Living on a school campus, as we have for some time, here in Wilmington and before that up in Connecticut, we know something about the pursuit of knowledge. Being part of a community that prides itself on sharing and encouraging the acquisition of knowledge with little threes year olds, and eighteen year olds and everyone in between, and adult colleagues as well, is an extraordinary privilege. Of course I am biased about this. I am married to a teacher who also taught school with her younger brothers when they were little. The brothers will tell you they didn’t have much choice in the matter; I’m also the son and brother of teachers—people who have devoted their lives to sharing knowledge with generations of students. Sometimes that can be intimidating. Often, they have read much more than I have. They know more than I do; yet part of their strength comes from knowing what they don’t know, from knowing the limits of knowledge.

When I was in the fifth grade, my teacher was Mr. Davenport. He was the strictest of the fifth grade teachers, whose dry sense of humor was not often seen by his students. He was tall, and clearly very smart and he taught us to be better readers, better interpreters, better listeners, and of course better behaved as I suspect fifth grade boys need to be taught. I have some vague recollections of class days with Mr. Davenport and I still have a report that I wrote about the Tower of London, in cursive on lined paper with pictures cut out and glued with rubber cement throughout. Yet what I remember most about Mr. Davenport is not his knowledge but something else all together.

My family took a trip to Great Britain when I was nine years old—so before I was in fifth grade--and we were in London at the same time as Mr. Davenport, and he invited my older brother and me to join him for dinner at Simpson’s in the Strand, a marvelous restaurant known for its roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. He made a reservation for three gentlemen and I’ll never forget it.

What Mr. Davenport knew, and what the best teachers throughout the world also know, is that knowledge by itself is not enough. However valuable knowledge may be, something else is more important and that something else is love. *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

¹ Eugene C. McAfee, Sermon preached at Faith United Church of Christ, Richmond Heights, OH. January 29, 2005.

Paul wrote those words to the church in Corinth, a church that knew about all kinds of divisions. It had rich people and poor people. It had educated people and not so educated people. It had people who had grown up in the community of faith, and pagans who had learned about Jesus and joined the community in much more recent times. As Douglas Campbell writes: “These diverse Corinthian converts brought into their Christian Community all the hostility, suspicion, and misunderstanding that arose from these differences in race, class, and gender.”² It sounds a little like our world today filled as it is with suspicion, misunderstanding and hostility.

Paul’s word for those Corinthians and for us today is that knowledge, wonderful as it is, is not enough. *Knowledge puffs up but love builds up*. Dr. King put it this way: “Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s “Theory of Relativity” to serve. You don’t have to know the Second Theory of Thermal Dynamics in Physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.”³

If we want to build up the church of Jesus Christ in the world today, then knowledge is not enough. The church will rise and fall not on what we know, but on whom we love. It is the simplest and most difficult of answers. It can take a lifetime to learn. If you want to be the people God calls us to be in this part of the world, then start practicing the art of love.

You’ve heard me talk about my dream for this place. In a time when we are more divided than many of us can ever remember, when we as a nation lack trust in our institutions and see compromise as failure, we right here have something to contribute. It has nothing to do with being conservative or liberal. It has nothing to do with what position we hold or what books we’ve read. It has nothing to do with whether we’ve grown up in the church and have generations of ancestors who have served the church before us. It has nothing to do with whether we are ninety-six or nine or somewhere in between. It has to do with one thing: love. Love of God, love of neighbor and love of ourselves.

The church has known division before. The world has known division before. We’ve been here before. Our calling remains the same: to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we need more than knowledge. We need love. If you want to love God, then start by loving every single one of the neighbors God has given to us.

Let us pray: Help us, Lord, to become masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Teach us again your message of love, shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

² Douglas A. Campbell, Culture Wars at Corinth, in *The Christian Century*, January 3, 2018, Vol. 135 No. 1. © 2017.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Drum Major Instinct*. Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, February 4, 1968 in *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Edited by James M. Washington. Harper San Francisco. © 1986