

“But, I Know the Answer!”
1 Corinthians 8: 1-13 January 29, 2012
The Presbyterian Church of Dover DE

I'm a big fan of the Harry Potter books and movies. That may not be true for everyone in the sanctuary today. So, just to help out those not “in the know,” let's pretend we're in a classroom for the moment. I'm the teacher. Okay, class. Those of you who have shown the good taste and initiative to have read at least one of the Harry Potter books, and would like to impress me, please raise your hand if you know the answer to these questions. “What is the name of Harry's best male friend?” (Ron Weasley) “What is the name of Harry's best female friend (not girlfriend)?” (Hermione Granger). “What is the name of the professor that Harry dislikes the most – at least in the first six books?” (Professor Snape). Very good!

If you haven't read any of the books or seen the movies, that little exercise was not much fun, was it? And that speaks to the point Paul wants to make in this part of his letter to the Corinthians. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

If you'll indulge me once again, there's a scene in the third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, that illustrates this well. It's really more memorable in the movie. As you correctly noted, Professor Snape is Harry's nemesis. He is brilliantly played by the British actor Alan Rickman in the series – always dresses in black, never smiles, is haughty and sarcastic, and usually speaks slowly and distinctly. Harry, Ron and Hermione are in his class – actually he is subbing for Professor Lupin in the Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Snape asks a question that he assumes no one will be able to answer, as the material has not yet been covered. You need to know that Hermione is a A+ student, retains everything she reads, and does all the extra reading.

She is truly an over-achiever. So, of course, she knows the answer, and even though Snape will not call on her, she can't restrain herself, and gives a more than thorough answer to the question. Snape sneers at her (she's right, of course), and says, "That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger. Are you incapable of restraining yourself, or do you take pride in being an insufferable know-it-all?" And Ron whispers to Harry, "He's got a point, you know."

We like to be right. We like to be "in the know." We like to have knowledge. Presbyterians especially value knowledge. Historically we have been noted for requiring our clergy to be well educated: college degree, seminary degree – including proficiency in Greek and Hebrew – internships in churches as students, clinical pastoral education units – bible content exam – four ordination exams – examinations by various presbytery committees and pastor nominating committees. We need to know a lot of stuff.

But that's not enough, is it? It's not enough to live faithfully just on our knowledge. That's what Paul wants to teach the church folks in Corinth. We read this passage about a dispute over eating meat that has been offered to idols, and we think, "Well, that's not a problem in our culture. Who cares about this, Paul?" And we often dismiss the passage. I don't think I've heard a single sermon on it, even though it is in the lectionary. We dismiss it at our own peril, my friends. Paul wants to teach us that even if we are right (and we can never be too sure of that), our knowledge should never be valued above our love for our sister or brother. Love for one another – especially in the Christian community – is the first priority. Loving God and loving one another. That takes precedence over our individual freedoms.

It's a tricky balance that Paul calls us to find. Knowledge in and of itself is not being spurned. Paul often begins his teachings with "We know that...." What is *not* helpful is when we get carried away with displaying our knowledge, giving ourselves status, making our knowledge a stumbling block for others. This was the norm in the Greco-Roman world: advanced knowledge gave advanced status. Not so for the Christian community, says Paul. The knowing that really counts is being known by God. For that to happen, we have to love God. And if we love God, we must love our neighbor. Love means caring for one another, and knowledge must be used in service to that love.

Does that mean we should avoid conflict at all costs? As Paul himself would often say, "By no means!" The Christian community should always be the safe place for moral and ethical discourse. What I believe we are to learn here is that every member of the community must be taken seriously, even those who are new to the life of faith – heck, especially those who are new to it, who are "baby" Christians – because Christ lived and died and rose again for every one of us. Every one of us. And Christ *knows and loves* every one of us.

As Paul points out in the 13th chapter of Corinthians, knowledge passes away. We all can testify to that. The Greek and Hebrew vocabulary? Pretty much gone. The details of the history of the church – dates and places? Pretty much gone. But what is still guiding me is the love. I had my New Testament courses and Greek courses with Professor Sharyn Dowd – a VERY grown up Christian. She grew up in the south as a Baptist. She's the one who made sure if we were translating Greek and the text called for second person plural, we must say "All y'all," so she would know we had it right. At

the beginning of every class I was blessed to take under her guidance, she would say this. “This classroom is a Christian community, and we will show love and respect for one another. I love every one of you and nothing will change that. You will have to work for your grades and if you don’t, I will not pass you. But I will still love you. There will be no rolling of the eyes in this room when someone seems to be wrong or struggling. There will be no snickering. If you give pain to your brother or sister, you give pain to Jesus Christ, because we are his body. We are a Christian community and we love one another. Now, let’s get to work.” *That* has stayed with me.

Sharyn Dowd and the Apostle Paul would agree, I think, that what we believe and know about God bears on the decisions we make every day. To whom do we belong? To God and to each other.

I consider myself blessed beyond expression to be your pastor, and to be a part of this loving congregation. We have it good here, my friends. But we are called to live out our faith every day; for our lives to be a witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Those who are more mature in faith can set examples for those just learning. We can live out our baptismal vows to nurture one another – especially our children – by sharing our knowledge, by learning with them – in this rich sea of love, this church.

One last Harry Potter reference. When I was serving my first church in Morehead KY I was a mentor to a middle school girl whose family lived paycheck to paycheck. They did not go to church, although she was interested in going. Of course, this was a school-based mentoring program, and I was not there as a pastor. I was there as her friend and encourager. She loved to read, so we often selected books to read and discuss. Naturally, I brought up the Harry Potter series, but she told me her

parents wouldn't let her read them because they had heard they were about witchcraft. Even though I *knew* that was not the case – at least not in the way her parents feared – it was not my role to comment about her parents' decisions. I *knew* better.... but the loving thing was to let it go and move on. That was hard. Now she is 21 years old and we are friends on Facebook. I asked her this week if she has read the books or seen the movies, and she has. The time was not right then, but it is now.

In the church, in the presbytery, even in our families, we come with different reading lists, with different opinions, with different backgrounds of knowledge, at different stages in the life of faith. This diversity is God's gift to us, to guard against us puffing ourselves up. Love, my friends, the love of God in Christ, our love for one another and for our neighbor – love builds up.

May it be so for all of us. Amen.