

Our first reading comes from Paul's First letter to the church in Corinth, Greece.

Chapter 8:1-13. Now, to set this reading up, since we have not been following this book of the bible lately. Corinth is a metropolitan place situated on a major crossroads of trade between two bodies of water carrying goods east/west and a small swatch of land that joins trade routes between Southern and Northern Greece. Heavy trade means a variety of peoples from all over the region...hence, the cosmopolitan nature of the city.

But Corinth is also in the heart of Greece, and therefore Paul is converting many Gentiles from Idol worshipping religions of many Gods... over to the very NON idol religion of the one God of Israel, revealed and known to us in the person of Jesus Christ. So what you are about to hear are instructions dealing with this tension that exist for these new Christians.

A second issue in the Corinthian church is the social disparity between its members with some coming from wealthier or educated classes and some from common classes. It is highly probable that this congregation may have contained slave and slave owner alike...an amazing testament to the equalizing affect of the gospel. But yet, when you have social, economic, and educational tensions...it also creates opportunities for disagreement. So Paul in this letter is trying to address just that. And you will hear a hint of some disagreement among the members in our reading today. Paul offers very practical, yet powerful words to his congregation. Listen now for the Word of the Lord...

“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 God.*

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as in fact there are many gods and many lords — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, (that) they still think of the food they eat as food having been offered to a (real) idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled (by this thought). ‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty (this understanding that you have) does not somehow become a stumbling block (to them, who are) weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food (they think has really been) sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers (for whom Christ died) are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if it is (something as simple as) food (that) is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.” **The word of the Lord...**

Our second reading comes from the Gospel of MARK, chapter 1:21-28. I'll let this text speak for itself...

(Jesus and the Disciples) went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, (Jesus) entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The Word of the Lord...thanks be to God.

So...last weekend, I hope you noticed, that I was absent. Dottie Ward came up to me after my Sunday Unpacked lesson on Wednesday and said "When you started talking about your sermon...I started thinking WOW I must not have been listening...I don't remember any of this!" And then she remembered that I was not actually here on Sunday. Now that tells me one of two things...either Dottie has a lot on her plate and on her mind...which very well maybe the case...or, it is not THAT noticeable when I am absent.

Now before you think that I might suffer from some form of inferiority complex...let me assure you that it is all perfectly fine with me if my absence is not noted (although I cannot tell you the number of people who've told me about the PELICAN story this week). But seriously...

My greatest WISH for any congregation is that they would not skip a single beat if their pastor failed to show up in the pulpit. Now, if my information is correct, that has actually happened here on one occasion when some lazy Seminarian called in a “no show” at 8:30 on a Sunday morning. Which is pretty bad, but not AS bad as the one who forgot to turn his lapel mike off when he went to the bathroom.

So, its an interesting thought, isn't it? *Not... the seminarian in the bathroom...but the thought of a congregation not skipping a beat when the pastor, or supply preacher, does not show.*

Last Sunday, as part of the Flint River Presbytery Pulpit Swap, Melody Jenkins and Janet Sheldon – representing our Session. My wife, Shay, the kids and myself...attended worship at Adel Presbyterian Church in downtown Adel...Baby! Now Adel Presbyterian is a 120 year old church. It has been at the heart of that community for over a century (much like this church). It sits right across the street from the Methodist Church (much like this church). And as we came in to town and went back out of town we passed by that Methodist church and it seemed to have a thriving presence there. Lots of cars, families coming in and out, a lot (thank the Good Lord) like this church on most Sundays (Holiday weekends excluded of course).

But Adel Presbyterian, has a much smaller presence in that community than their Methodist neighbors, and as we gathered in their social hall and eventually headed into the

Sanctuary, we worshipped with about 10 or 12 of their members that morning, who represented the majority of their congregation.

Now, after worship I was talking to Donnalee Preston, their clerk of session and resident musician, and I asked who was their regular pastor? Now, I was expecting to hear a response that included either a Lay Pastor or a seminary trained Tent Maker Pastor (which means they hold a second job). But instead, She replied, *“Well...we don’t really have one right now. And we haven’t for a while. We take supply preachers or lay preachers when we can. BUT, most of the time we gather and just lead worship among ourselves. We usually divide it up.”*

Now, I am going to be honest with you...you can react to that statement one of two ways. The first would be, *“Poor little Adel...they don’t have a Pastor, someone to lead them...I don’t know how they make it.”* Or, you can say *“My God, what an amazing little congregation. How incredibly faithful that they gather and worship whether they have someone spouting out Seminary trained Theology from their pulpit or not!”* (Slow down)

And it raises the question. Is it not the most incredible testimony that this small remnant of members faithfully gathers to worship, even though they have no one of any training or authority in their pulpit?

The Apostle Paul says, in our reading today says, **“Knowledge puffs up (which is the first century Greek equivalent of saying “Knowledge gives you the BIG HEAD), but love builds up,”** which means it edifies, it strengthens, it builds character, it is foundational...and apparently it can keep one hundred and twenty year old congregations going despite the fact that they have no one to LEAD them on most Sundays. Paul goes on to say. **“Anyone**

who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God.” And I can assure you...after being with them last week...God knows the congregation at Adel Presbyterian, because He sent his Spirit to be alive and present among us on that rainy morning.

Now you have heard me mention on several occasions the name of Fred Craddock. And, if you know who Craddock is, you know that he is one of the most famous Protestant Preachers in the country...and I will wager...the world. But Fred Craddock is also known as Dr. Fred Craddock Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus at Candler School of Theology, which is the theological branch of Emory University in Atlanta (where he taught for decades). Fred Craddock, the simple spoken, slight statured, homespun preacher from Rural Tennessee, is a doctorate level academic...an intensely trained, Doctorate level academic. He has written “a number of books, including...commentaries on the Gospel of John (1982)...Philippians (1984)...and a commentary on Luke (1990)”¹, which is part of the Interpretation Commentary series we have in our very own library. (And, I might add, until I started cracking the bindings on that commentary series those books looked completely untouched. We have a wonderful library at this church...we need to use it to study, among other things, God’s Word).

But the main reason why many of us even know Fred Craddock...is due to one little 156 page book he wrote in 1971, titled...*As One Without Authority*. What you may not know is that in 1971 Craddock, with that book, turned the world of preaching on its head. He absolutely shook the very core of the preaching world in that day and in doing so he spun off

a revolution in preaching that has carried us until this present time, and frankly, right into this very pulpit, on numerous occasions.

What Craddock did in 1971 was to say that the traditional style of Preaching...the 1-2-3 point sermon... had become irrelevant. The old idea of the mighty Prince of the Pulpit ascending up on high to bring the message for the day, interpreting the Scripture, telling the congregation what they needed to think about that Scripture, and then wrapping it up in a nice, neat 3 point package and handing it to them...wasn't cutting it anymore. And, Craddock, a simple country boy from Tennessee, stood up and pointed out that the world was starting to challenge the Preacher's authority.

What Craddock proposed was a new way of preaching, one that did not resolve all the tensions or claim to provide ALL the answers. One that drew people into the text by stories and examples, and then assumed that the people, the listeners, the congregation members had the very capable ability of connecting the dots and finding meaning for themselves. That they did not always have to have it broken down and interpreted for them, because that was stealing from them what Craddock called the "AHA" moment. That moment when you are studying the text and "AHA", you find meaning and application for your own life.

Thus the preacher, rather than a Prince on high of amazing interpretive authority, becomes a fellow sojourner. A fellow traveller on the journey of faith, who is simply trying to offer a shred of light on a good word for the day. **Something that may challenge, something that may inspire, but to do so in a way that let's the listener determine where the authority will come from.**

So Jesus walks into the synagogue and the people are AMAZED at his words, and his actions. They are blown away at the way he talks to them and to the demon in that man, and Mark says, “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

A preacher, a pulpit on high, a 1-2-3 point sermon handed over to the congregation telling them what to think does not a church make. Jesus said wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in my name I am there with you, and I think we can infer from Mark...that means Jesus (by the power of the Holy Spirit) is there WITH AUTHORITY. **And there are 12 faithful Christians in Adel, GA... Baby, sitting in a Sanctuary right now...reading scripture together without a leader, trying to discern what it means for their life, and how it can help them be faithful disciples of this one man Jesus, son of God. And thank God, we are blessed to have congregations like THAT to remind us...what church is REALY all about, and who is the One in the church who has the real authority.**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Friends, I invite you to stand...if you want to...and recite Psalm 23...as our affirmation of faith. But before we begin let me ask you one simple question...one I think we ought to ask ourselves at the beginning of each and everyday...WHO is your authority...who is your shepherd?

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen. Hallelujah. Amen.

¹ Wikipedia article "Fred Craddock"