

[[That Guy Branches commercial](#)]

Everyone, if we're honest, has a little anxiety about "that guy". You know the one who's in every group (not just small groups, but at the office, in your family, pretty much any groups we're part of). Maybe they're rude or belligerent. Maybe they over-share all the time. Maybe their personal hygiene is less than optimal.

[[Rows vs. Circles](#)] Regardless, Church is one of the few places in life that choosing a small group is optional. If you stick to the rows of a big gathering like this, then as long as you like the speaker or the music, you'll probably be good. You don't really have to interact with other people beyond a smile and maybe a handshake.

But this month, we've been pushing this thing we're calling Branches - a new small group experience we believe is the next right step for our church. For the last couple of weeks, we've been pushing sign-ups. And that's made some of us pretty nervous. How could it not?

[[Isolated Circles vs. Mixed Circle](#)] We spent a good bit of time last week acknowledging the anxiety many of us feel over engaging new people, especially when they're different from us. We talked about meeting people where they are, loving them for who they are, not who we want them to be. We saw how worship in the Corinthian house churches had devolved to a place where they reinforced the divisions among the Corinthians rather than celebrating their common need for Jesus and their common faith in him.

We listened in as Paul told them they need each other, that their groups should unite, not further divide. That Paul expected their circles (and ours) to be diverse. To include people who aren't like us.

I think there's a natural question that arises from Paul's instructions. An honest, realistic question that goes beyond a person with an annoying quirk (because we all have annoying quirks, and we all want to be loved in spite of our quirks, so Golden Rule love people with quirks the way you want to be loved with your quirks).

But what about differences that go beyond the superficial?

What about people who differ on big issues... like abortion or gay rights? The Economy, immigration, gun control, parenting styles... we could go on and on. Part of the reason we like our circles to be small and similar to us is that we like the predictability of sameness.

And frankly, none of us loves the idea of getting into huge fights. So we're left with not too many options when it comes to small groups: we can keep the conversation shallow (which means we're not really going to get to that place growth happens) or we run the very real risk of hitting one of any number of conversational landmines.

The deep question, the honest and fair question here is: how can we realistically expect to live life with those who see the world differently from us? Isn't there a pretty good reason we always divide ourselves up by age, by gender, by religion, denomination and worldview, by nation and language and every conceivable way we can draw lines between Us and Them we do it.

So we hear you, Paul, when you say we need each other. We're just not sure how that actually plays out

in real life.

The good news for us this morning is that the Corinthian Church faced that same radical call to unity despite our differences. Paul's instructions to them matter for us as well, and today we'll see the simple, powerful beauty in his advice:

[**Knowledge Tower/Love Shack**] Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.

That's what Paul tells the Corinthians: when you have a choice between being right and showing love, you choose to love. Every time.

[**Judge vs. Accept Dial**] That's interesting, because choosing to love isn't either of the options we typically select. When we're faced with people who disagree with us, with complicated, divisive issues, we either judge or accept. Judging is making a rule, a law, ending the discussion by saying This is the right way. Accepting (or we might call it tolerating if we wanted to be all buzz-wordy) is the opposite. Accepting essentially says the issue isn't important enough to argue about so just live and let live. Accepting ends the discussion by refusing to have a discussion.

[**Love Dial**] But Judgment and Acceptance aren't our only two options, the only two responses available to us. Listen again to Paul's words: Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up. Love doesn't leave things lie, love doesn't dismiss all differences as unimportant. But neither does love assume it knows everything, that all my judgments are pure and right, that I have the single most pure and whole understanding of a particular situation. Love says the relationship is more important than being right. Love says, I might have something to learn.

A true love for another person is neither judgmental nor accepting. Love is not content to allow another person to persist in a wrong or harmful behavior. This is why good parents discipline their children. Discipline is not a sign of cruelty (not when it's done well). Correction is a sign of love. Because love refuses to rule by law, but love also refuses to accept blindly.

And when we're not talking about a parent/child relationship, when we're talking about the sort of love that binds together a community like this, a love among equals, the same is true. Love embraces a person where they are and at the same time calls them forward, into a fuller humanity. Love lays down its right to be right. Love accepts the potential for change even as love seeks to change.

[**Isolated Circles vs. Mixed Circle**] We cannot escape these difficult scenarios. In every culture, in every time, in every place, issues divide us. And we can choose the easy route of staying in our echo chambers, surrounded only by people who agree with us or we can choose to embrace those who are different from us.

But if we choose to risk, we must choose the path of Loving disagreement. This is what Paul encouraged the Corinthians to do as well, and I want to investigate his words to them with you as we consider how to lovingly disagree.

[**Scripture Slide**] If you have a Bible, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 8. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the rack on the way in or out of the pew in front of you, you can find 1 Corinthians 8 on page XXX. And if you don't have a Bible, please keep that as a gift from us.

The Corinthian church was comprised of small groups of Jesus-followers gathering in houses. And we've seen over the last couple of weeks that they're divided over all kinds of issues - whose leadership philosophy they like best, by socio-economic class, and today we'll see they have some of those difficult issues, too.

This letter we call 1 Corinthians was written by Paul, the founder of the Church, in response to a letter from the leaders of the Corinthian church. And in this section of scripture, he specifically addresses one of those difficult questions that divides churches:

Eating meat sacrificed to idols.

I know... what? But this question: "Can a person who follows Jesus eat meat that's been sacrificed to a pagan god?" was the abortion or homosexuality issue of its day. The Corinthian Christians were divided over it, and it was causing rifts in their worship, in their community.

So what's the big deal? Sacrifices in the ancient world were public events. And in a city like Corinth, they were often associated with the various guilds. The guild would meet at the temple of their patron god or goddess, offer sacrifices and then throw a public feast using the sacrificed foods. So it's very likely that many of the Corinthian Christians were feeling social pressure to participate in these feasts. If they quit going to the temples, they risked their jobs, a loss of income for their families and their church.

You can imagine the arguments, right? Some take the position that participating in these feasts is the same as worshiping these false gods, which you abandoned when you chose to follow Jesus. It's these gods or Jesus. You can't do both. Take a choice. Make a stand. Quit compromising.

The other side says, But these gods aren't real. There's only one true god, and it's the God who raised Jesus from the dead. I can attend these feasts without worshiping these false gods. In fact, I can be salt and light there, building relationships with those who're still worshiping these false gods.

And so on and so on. This issue was dividing the Corinthian church. So how does Paul address it? Let's listen to him, beginning in verse 1 of chapter 8:

Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes. -- 1 Corinthians 8:1-3

Paul quotes a Corinthian proverb - "we all have knowledge". As a Greek culture, the Corinthians valued knowledge above all else. They were a culture of scholars, and as you can imagine, they loved to debate and discuss. What mattered most to the Corinthians was being right.

This translation obscures a little bit of what Paul is doing, so I want to show you another translation that highlights some of his wordplay a bit:

Yes, we know we that "we all have knowledge" about this issue. But while *knowledges* puffs us up, love builds us up. Anyone who claims to *know* all the answers doesn't really *know* very much. But the person who loves God is *known* by God.

Knowledge puffs us up. What does he mean by that? Paul knows that knowledge is at the root of judgment. [Tower] Judging is all about drawing lines, figuring out who's right and who's wrong. And of course, when I sit in judgment, I have the best knowledge, the rightest position, the truest insight. I know I'm right, so I judge everyone else as wrong. As less. As dumb/inferior/lesser.

Knowledge puffs up. This is the high Corinthian virtue. Knowledge.

[Knowledge Tower/Love Shack] And Paul says, There's something better. Because while knowledge puffs us up, love builds us up. He goes back to that house-building language he used early in the letter, when he talked of the Corinthians as God's building, as his own work laying a foundation.

Paul says Knowledge isn't what builds the church. Love builds the church.

Knowledge puffs up. But love builds up.

According to Paul, being right isn't all it's cracked up to be.

That's not what the Corinthians expected, is it? Doubtless they expected Paul to take a side, to tell them one group or the other was right. To judge for them. To highlight which side of the line was right. But instead, Paul refuses to take a side. Over the next three chapters, Paul explains what he means by "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up". And then, in conclusion, he still refuses to take a side. Listen to his words at the end of chapter 10:

Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God. I, too, try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what is best for me; I do what is best for others so that many may be saved. And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ. -- 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Paul says, when it comes to eating meat sacrificed to idols, there's not one right answer. Do whatever the Spirit leads you to do. But what should be most important isn't what you want. You should be motivated by love for the other people around you.

[Love Shack] Both sides should look to love. Those who tend to be more legalistic, more judgmental (you know who you are): be gracious. Don't lead with legalism. Lead with grace. Commit to listen before you speak, to be slow to anger and quick to offer mercy. Consider the possibility that you might be wrong, that sometimes culture and truth are wound up too tightly to be easily distinguished and you might have something to learn from this lawless near-pagan across the circle from you.

To those who tend to be more accepting, who tend to live-and-let-live (you know who you are): Don't revel in your freedom. Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should, especially if it's going to cause a bunch of needless conflict. Don't lead with acceptance. Lead with respect. Commit to listen seriously to those who are more strict than you, to put their sensibilities above your proclivities. Consider the possibility that you might be wrong, that culture can blind us to truth and that some issues need to be carefully parsed beyond what can fit on a bumper sticker, and you might have something to learn from that uptight Pharisee across the circle from you.

The real problem with both judgment and acceptance is that they're context-free. If I make a rule, it's absolute. It's the same in all cases, in all scenarios. I don't need to know someone to know what they're

doing is right (or wrong). I have my rule.

The same is true of acceptance. It doesn't matter who you are. What you do. I accept you.

Those are so sterile, and so unlike love. Love which is not context-less, but context-full. I can't love you in abstract. I can only love you as I know you, and the better I know you, the more fully I can love you. That's why rules and laws are no good for these divisive, complicated topics, issues and subjects. We must embrace each other, not stay divided.

One of the issues that has historically been a problem for our denomination is alcohol. A long time ago, we passed a rule that said, Absolutely no alcohol, ever. That Nazarenes couldn't even patronize establishments that serve alcohol. Sorry Applebee's!

[Picture of Bresee] Do you know where that rule came from? From the founder of the Church of the Nazarene, a guy named Phineas Bresee. Bresee ran a church in Los Angeles that served the very poor in homeless of the city. Then as now, a large portion of that demographic is alcoholic. So, following Paul's instructions, Bresee and his team chose not to drink - they refused their freedom to drink alcohol because of their love for the people who inhabited their context.

But as the church became a denomination and that denomination grew, the loving, context-full choice Bresee made became an absolute, context-free rule. No one can drink alcohol. Ever.

These days, that law is technically still in our manual, though it's getting more and more pressure. From where? The international Nazarene Church. As the Church brings the good news about Jesus all over the world, they come into cultures that don't have the same unhealthy relationship with alcohol American culture does. They're in a different context, one in which the absolute law we have about booze doesn't make sense.

And so slowly, our denomination is changing our law to something that encourages not the law about alcohol, but the law of love. The law that demands only we think not about what I want, but what's best for the people around me. The law that demands I love, in full context, not judge or accept in blind detachment.

For Paul, and for us, if we would follow him as he followed Jesus, the only law we are under is the law of love. And listen to how Paul describes love just a little bit later:

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. -- 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

[Love Shack/Mixed Circles graphic] None of us is perfect. None of us is completely the person God is

calling us to be... yet. And we find healing, we find wholeness, in choosing to sit across the circle from people who are different from us. People who are following Jesus just like we are but don't see eye-to-eye on every issue. We need those people and they need us. Not to sit in judgment. Not to blindly accept. But to love.

To do the difficult work of disagreeing well, to choose to be unified rather than be right. To build together on the foundation of Jesus' death and resurrection a church, a house of God in which you are both pillars, supports, frames.

Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.

Let Beavercreek Nazarene be known not for being right, but for being loving. For welcoming everyone in our community and for being the best place in town to grow, to take your faith to the next level.

Communion Set-Up

[Communion Slide] There's no better picture of this radical commitment to love than the communion table. This table represents the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he died. At that meal, he took bread, broke it and gave it to them. He told them the bread was his body, broken for them, for their sinfulness. So too we take a wafer to represent our sin, our brokenness.

Later in the meal, Jesus passed around a cup of wine. He told them the wine was his blood, spilled to initiate a new kind of relationship between God and humanity. So we dip our wafers in grape juice to represent the new life Jesus has given us.

Jesus died for us. He gave us his whole life. His death is the foundation of our new life. This is love. Jesus didn't give us a pop quiz. He doesn't ask us to pass a doctrine test. Because Knowledge only puffs up.

And the one who came among us with perfect knowledge didn't judge us. And he didn't just accept us. He loved us by giving us his whole life so that we could have new life.

Love builds up.

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to receive communion. This is Jesus' table. And he invites anyone today who's willing to reach across the circle in love, anyone who's willing to lay down your right to be right in favor of your right to love, to risk, to dare to embrace that person who's different from you.

You can do that because Jesus embraced you, when you were his enemy. And his love has transformed you and them. So let your steps toward the table today be a commitment to be different, to love differently. To put away judgment. To put away acceptance. And to risk the hard path of love.

I'm going to pray, and then as you're ready, you're invited to come to Jesus' table.

Benediction

Go today. Be patient and kind. Don't be jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Don't demand your own way. Don't be irritable, and keep no record of being wronged. Don't rejoice about injustice but rejoice whenever the truth wins out. Never give up, never lose faith, always be

hopeful, and endure through every circumstance.

Go today in the name of the God who is Love, the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.