

***“Knowledge Puffs Up”- The First Great Heresy: Gnosticism***  
***February 21, 2010 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent***  
***1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1: 18-25; 2: 1-5; Matthew 8: 5-13***

Any serious in-depth study of George Washington, whose birthday, by the way, is tomorrow, would only confirm what all of us were taught when we were young children at school: that George Washington was a genuinely good man; that he was a person of enormous integrity; that he was an impressive leader, whose leadership skills were deeply connected to the force and depth of his character; that he deservedly is called the Father of His Country; and that it is impossible to imagine anyone else being this country’s first President.

And yet, there was a time, over a period of a year or so, just before he was elected President, when Washington was caught up in a national controversy that, if he had not acted as he did, would have both cost him the presidency and would have done damage to the young nation.

The controversy surrounded the existence of the Society of Cincinnatus, the first veterans group in this country. Established near the end of the Revolutionary War, it was designed to continue friendships that had been forged during that war and to help families of those veterans who had been killed in battle in that war.

All well and good...All innocent enough... A good idea based on friendship and charity... However, the way that the organization had first been structured struck many people - including Benjamin Franklin, the great Quaker General Nathaniel Greene, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson – as exclusive, elitist, secretive, aristocratic... in short, not at all democratic... in short, not American.

And since Washington was the first president of the Society, he was in the center of the storm.

In short order, George Washington, through sheer perseverance - through the force of his character – so thoroughly changed the charter of that Society that every aspect of secrecy and mystery was thoroughly removed. The critics were silenced and soon became vocal supportive of the Society’s goals.

Washington’s actions saved a useful veterans organization, one that still exists today, silenced the first great controversy of a young nation, and made possible the election of Washington as President.

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That early controversy, one that came *that* close to damaging Washington’s reputation, illustrates the fact the people have at best an uneasy relationship with any kind of secret, elitist, inaccessible society or group. As much as we like being in the know, we hate all the more being left out and not in the know.

And yet that temptation endures: to be in the know; to be the first to know; to know something that someone else doesn’t know; to know more than someone else.

And that was the rhyme and reason for a mess of minor of religions, all under the heading of Gnosticism, that came *this* close to corrupting and nearly killing the Early Church in its infancy and that continues to play havoc with churches today.

For today’s message – and all the messages that will follow during Lent – are not meant to be merely history lessons about something that happened two thousand or so years ago. Rather these messages about the

great heresies - heresies, from the Greek *haeresis*, meaning “wrong belief” - are warnings - are, in fact, cautionary tales of how certain beliefs, if not examined and then checked, will, like weeds, grow and poison all that is good.

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There is a little seven paragraph enclosure in this morning’s bulletin that provides a thumbnail sketch of several aspects of Gnosticism. I hope that you read it when you have some time and then call me with questions if you have further interest in the subject.

But this morning I want you to know this... In the earliest days of the Christian Church, Gnostic groups of every shape and size were sprouting up in every community and were competing - often successfully - for the hearts, minds, and souls of people who had first come to Christ.

What Gnostic groups valued most of all was being in the know. What they offered was for others **to begin** to be in the know. What they **did** to others was to keep others out... to keep people in the dark, so that there were people in the know and thus, in - and then there were people who didn’t know or who didn’t know all that they were told that they needed to know; and they, of course, were out.

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In the two passages that we heard this morning, the Apostle Paul confronts the very idea that we become saved by what we know when he says this:

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation to save those who believe.”

“To save those who believe.”

There is no secret formula needed for us to know God... **Only belief**... Only to trust and obey; **to grow in grace**, so that in time, in our faith walk with Jesus, the focus will less and less about what we know about God and more and more about how God knows you.

“Our hope is built in nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness”...that, and nothing more. No hidden information... no hocus pocus... no complicated story or scheme...**Just faith**...

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The Gospel reading this morning is a powerful remedy - an antidote, if you will – for all those vain and frantic attempts to secure our salvation by any other means than faith.

A Roman centurion comes to Jesus announcing a pressing need, saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed in terrible distress.”

When Jesus offers to come to the soldier’s house, the soldier replies that Jesus doesn’t need to go out of his way; and then he says to Jesus: “Just speak the word - just speak the word of healing - and my servant will be healed, for I will bring your word to him.”

**Just speak the word - just share the words of Jesus and his love with others – and the lives that you touch will be made whole.**

When Jesus hears the soldier's reply, Jesus proclaims to all who could hear him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith!" And then Jesus turns to the soldier, saying to him, "Go... let it be done according to your faith" and the soldier's servant was healed.

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In both passages from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, Paul makes the same simple and compelling statement. In Chapter One, verses twenty-two and twenty-three, Paul writes, "The Jews demand signs and the Greeks desire wisdom, but **we proclaim Christ crucified**, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks." In Chapter two, in verse two, Paul writes, "I decided to know nothing **except Jesus, and him Crucified.**"

**We proclaim Christ crucified.** We honor and praise Jesus the Crucified and Risen Savior. Our symbol is the cross, the old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame. We do not celebrate what we know or how smart or accomplished we are or what we have done or what we have read and learned about Jesus. Rather we honor with humility **what has been done for us - that Jesus was crucified and died for us.**

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Which leads me to the central sin of all Gnostic beliefs and practices, whether it is present in the church at Corinth or active in the church down the road. The central sin is what secrets - along with the prideful ways that create secrets and that support exclusive clubs and that foster little groups and factions - do to the body of Christ.

"Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up," Paul tells the church at Corinth in chapter eight. These were our words of greeting this morning; and this, my friends, is the central message today...

"Knowledge puffs up."

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Here's a simple, seemingly easy-to-do Lenten discipline for all of us to try. The next time someone asks you anything about something which you already know... the next time someone says, "Hey, did you hear what Tiger Wood said or President Obama said or what the Duke basketball team did or what's going on in Afghanistan"... **even if you know**...even if you have been following Tiger Woods and President Obama and Duke basketball and the war overseas **very, very** closely... try, this... try, at least during Lent, to refrain from immediately replying, **"Yep, I know all about that."**

First of all, that reply is a conversation killer. Secondly, you may **not** know all about that. Thirdly, all that you are really doing is telling the other person that you are already in the know. "Knowledge puffs up."

Try this response instead. Try saying, "Well, I know *something* about that, but tell me what you know." You may end up learning something that you didn't know. You will have certainly furthered the conversation and have deepened your relationship with that person. "Love builds up."

In the latest edition of *Leading Ideas* – the website newsletter produced by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership, Curtis DeYoung of Bethel University calls upon us to develop “a discipline of dialogue.” - that it is to say, to keep quiet for a minute so as to let the other person speak... to be still and let other people share their stories... **their story**... to follow what the Apostle James advises us to do: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

I like that phrase... “A discipline of dialogue.” It may be the first constructive step to take for all church people – and for all pastors especially so – to begin to build up the body of Christ.

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For that is what we church people are first and foremost to do: to build up, to strengthen the body of Christ.

- ◆ That is precisely the purpose of this fellowship gathering scheduled at Mt. Zion at 5 PM this evening... to further our fellowship with one another, to deepen our relationship with one another, to share and to hear each other’s stories... **each other’s story.**
- ◆ That is precisely the purpose of those fellowship suppers held every third Saturday of the month at 6 PM at Walker’s. I invite, encourage, and, frankly, I call upon all of you to take some time away from your usual Saturday evening activities, bring a dish of some sort, and be a part of building up the body of Christ in this county.
- ◆ The same goes for the Prayer Breakfasts at Mt. Zion... at 8 AM... every third Sunday... this Sunday... this morning, as a matter of fact. If you weren’t there, I want you to know that you were missed and that your absence was noted.
- ◆ Fifth Sunday breakfasts at Bethsaida... the dinners to raise funds for the youth mission trip at Mt. Zion... the bake sales and the yard sales and the holiday dinner and the Easter egg hunt at Walker’s... the charge-wide worship events... Maunday Thursday, Good Friday, Sunrise Service... and yes, even the annual charge conference. When we as a charge – not merely as separate individuated churches – but as a charge – come together for a common purpose, even if the sole purpose is to get to know each other better, we are building up the body of Christ. **And that’s a good thing.**

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So, here is the question... How do we recognize Gnosticism in the pews today? How do we identify in this day and age a religion that wasn’t really a religion but was rather a mish mash of all sorts of religion and that was very much present in the first two to three hundred years of the early Christian church?

Like Gnosticism then, Gnostic expressions in the modern church take many shapes, all of them tempting and all of them crippling and all in the end, fatal for a church.

It takes the shape of those people within a given church who think they are more holy, more saved, more moral, more “right with Jesus” than their brothers and sisters sitting in the next pew. “Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up.”

It takes the shape of those “veteran members” of any church who have seen pastors come and go - and this is especially true in the Methodist tradition - who have convinced themselves that they know church better than anyone else and thus, they’re the only ones who should do church or lead church or decide what the church is to do. You can hear these Gnostics say, “We’ve always done it this way... We’ve never done it that way... We tried it that way once... I think it was several decades ago; and we’ll never do it that way again.”

“Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up.”

It takes the shape of those people who don’t quite “get church” - who have one foot in and one foot out of faith... who come and go to and from church like shoppers searching for the best buy ... who see church as what church can do for them rather than a place for renewal and service... who deep inside wonder if all this talk about faith and belief and trust in God... all of this talk about following Jesus is just some kind of a fool’s errand... who deep inside think they are smarter, more “with-it” than believers worshipping alongside them.

“Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up.”

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Now, I just named but three modern forms of Gnosticism, very much alive and active in the church today. I could likely identify several more.

But all the many ways people divide and weaken the body of Christ matters far less than the call upon all our lives to build up the body of Christ... to be instruments of peace and comfort and encouragement to each other... that we step out in faith... that we stand firmly on our trust in God... that we set our hearts and minds not on our desires but rather on the stark reality of the cross... that we follow Jesus with humility and with a joyful obedience...

And that we draw in, that we gather in everyone in who wants to follow, to be part of this journey of faith... And that we are careful to not do anything that leaves a single person out or a single person behind.

**Amen.**

