

## *Blueprint for Growth*

A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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For the past 121 years St. Mark's Church has taken one step after another, some of them small and some of them large, to grow, to be faithful, to live out the Good News of Jesus Christ in this place. As we gather for our Annual Meeting in a little over an hour we have this same opportunity. As we examine the 2012 budget, vote on candidates for vestry and diocesan representation, discuss parish initiatives for the coming year and take up other business we have the chance to take a big step forward. We want our church to continue to grow and be strong.

One of the obvious strengths of St. Mark's is this magnificent building. Those who came before us took opportunities to build this sanctuary, a parish hall, kitchen, offices, meeting spaces, Sunday School rooms and children's chapel. They didn't build them out of cardboard that would blow away and be ripped to shreds in some of our fresh Wyoming breezes. They didn't even build them out of wood that would need to be painted every few years and would be subject to termites and rot. They built this structure on a strong foundation, out of materials that will last for centuries.

This is our time to do the same thing with the inside part of the church, the living part of the church. This is our time to assist as the Holy Spirit builds our congregation, in ways that will endure the test of time. How will we help build our congregation with strength to last? What will be the best foundation for growth? What will we use for tools? What will guide us, like a blueprint?

These questions were probably in Paul's mind as he wrote his letter to the Corinthians. Some of the Corinthians thought knowledge was the foundation of their life as a church. I call them the "Super-Christians." The "Super-Christians" were totally wrapped up in their own knowledge of Christ. They wrote to Paul, and argued for the role of knowledge. They said, "We all possess knowledge." Paul doesn't deny the role of knowledge. Knowledge has its place. It informs our moral conscience.

But knowledge is not the foundation. Knowledge is a tool, like a hammer. A hammer can be extremely useful, but in itself it is not good or bad. We can use a hammer to build or we can use it to destroy. This is what Paul is talking about when he says: *if anyone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.*

The "Super-Christians" were completely confident in their knowledge that there is only one Lord. They knew the ritual sacrifices of the pagans were meaningless, so they went to these ceremonies to be with their pagan friends and get a tasty chunk of meat for dinner. But not everyone had this knowledge. Other members of the church saw the "Super-Christians" eating in pagan temples and began to think of Jesus Christ as just one of many lords to be worshipped. This is Paul's concern about using knowledge as the foundation for the church. Since people have different amounts of knowledge, using knowledge as the base creates an uneven foundation.

Paul also knows that if we just hammer away with a tool like knowledge, not building on a foundation or getting directions from a plan, we are pretty sure to build something that goes up quickly and falls down quickly. Paul describes it this way, *knowledge puffs up*. Knowledge will be one of our tools, but it's not the foundation and it must be guided by something with unending value.

St. Mark's is blessed to have many members who bring great gifts of knowledge. We have many other tools as well. This magnificent building is an example. But no matter how sturdy and beautiful a building is, it cannot be the foundation or the blueprint for the growth of our ministry.

I thought about this recently as I read of the sale of the Crystal Cathedral to a Roman Catholic Diocese in California. This church was founded in 1955 and grew very quickly, reaching its peak membership around the time it moved into the famous Crystal Cathedral in 1981. By 1987 the church had lost more than half of its members. By 2010 the church had more than 50 million dollars in debts and was forced to sell its famous building. This seems like an example of a church "puffing up", instead of building up. I wonder whether this is a situation where a church building came to be the foundation

and guiding principle for a church. The Crystal Cathedral was an architectural masterpiece and attracted many visitors, but somehow it seems to have become, both literally and symbolically, an empty shell.

We have other tools at our disposal. Paul uses the example of food. At St. Mark's we know the value of a great meal. We are also blessed with other tools to help grow the church, such as our pipe organ, a huge range of ministry teams, and financial resources given to us by previous generations of disciples.

We need to use these tools wisely if we are to grow the church to its full stature, acting as the Body of Christ in the world. If we are going to build our congregation of enduring numbers of people with enduring faith we can't make the mistake of thinking that one of these tools is our foundation or our blueprint for growth.

Paul says, *whoever loves God is known by God*. This is our foundation. This is where we begin. We begin with God. We are known by God. We are God's children. This is our first identity and primary responsibility. For you and you and you and every person in this place, your primary identity is that you are a child of God.

This foundation strengthens us as a community because God knows everyone of us equally and loves each one of us with fullness that passes our understanding. Being known by God also strengthens our community because we don't earn our relationship with God. Being known by God is a gift of grace. This is the rock that forms our foundation because this gift of grace will last forever; we cannot lose it and no one can ever take it away.

We have our foundation. We have our tools. We know we need guidance to use them. What will guide us as we take our next steps?

Paul says, *knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*. In contrast to the idea of using a tool like knowledge, a building, or money as the guiding force, love builds the church with strength because love is an unfailing value. When Paul says, *love builds up*, he's not talking about Valentine cards and roses. Paul describes love in 16 different ways later on in this letter to the Corinthians. You probably remember some of these. *Love is patient. Love does not insist on its own way*.

I would sum up Paul's idea about love this way: Love is taking care of the soul of that other person. Love is doing something small or big to help that other person's relationship with God grow for the long term. This isn't easy. This isn't a miracle-grow way of building the church. This is a one person at a time, one step at a time blueprint for building the church. It is less concerned with growing something quickly in this church, and more concerned with growing God's kingdom on earth in the long term.

It's not easy to see that caring for the souls of others is actually growing the church, because God's kingdom grows inside hearts and minds. It is also difficult to see, because much as we might like big crowds and the energy of a rock concert, taking care of the soul of that other person often happens in much smaller settings. Like right now, in a little room on the top floor of this building a woman sits with two or three children, helping grow their relationship with God for the long term.

There has never been a better time or place to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We know each person here, regardless of who they are or what they've done with their life, is known and loved by God. That's the strongest foundation that has ever existed. We are blessed with the best array of tools we could hope for: this magnificent building, our financial resources, and especially the knowledge and skill and faith you bring to this church. Finally, we have a blueprint for growth that invites every person in this place join in this mission.

What should we do first? What are the first steps for us to take as we seek to care for the souls of everyone around us, people who are sitting with us right now, and new people God really wants to have sitting with us tomorrow and the next day? Where is God calling us to take that next step?

We need your help and ideas today. We need you to think and pray with us. This is our time to work with the Holy Spirit, to build our congregation in faith and numbers, in ways that will endure the test of time. Let us give thanks and pray for God's guidance as we work to grow God's kingdom on earth.