

Building Material

Sermon, January 29, 2012

Text: Psalm 111; I Corinthians 8

We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God." I Corinthians 8:1b-3

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. Psalm 111:10

Born October 21, 1942, Judith Sheindlin is an American lawyer, author, judge and television personality. Better known as Judge Judy, Mrs. Sheindlin is well known for her no-nonsense legal style, powerful personality, sharpness, quick wit ... and facial animation. The show *Judge Judy* made its debut September 16, 1996. It met with instant success, making Judge Sheindlin a celebrity well known for her strict, no-nonsense attitude and lightning fast ability to clearly state what is on her mind. The program has been the number one court show since its debut, and is *the* only original show on television to increase its ratings each year, making Judge Judy an icon of American pop culture. The show's ratings average approximately ten million viewers each day, and is especially popular among female viewers between the ages of 25 and 54. In regard to the popularity of Judge Judy, author Brendan Koerner wrote: "*Court-show viewers don't seem to want moral conundrums or technical wrinkles. They love Sheindlin's show because she offers them a fantasy of how they'd like the justice system to operate—swiftly, without procedural mishaps or uppity lawyers. They get to see wrongdoers publicly humiliated by a strong authority figure. There is no uncertainty after Sheindlin renders her verdict ... and there certainly are no lengthy appeals.*" People apparently like clarity about what's right and wrong, about matters of ethics, morality and good old common sense living.

I love the title of Judge Judy's best-selling book, *Beauty Fades, Dumb Is Forever* (subtitled: "*The Making of a Happy Woman*"). Judge Sheindlin tells us on a You-Tube promo (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhBa9N3bL2E>) it was based on advice her grandmother had told her when she was a little girl. "Sweetheart, beauty fades, but dumb is forever." According to the judge, the title is self explanatory: beauty will age and fade, but it's your mind that keeps you vital, it's your mind that keeps you interesting, and it's your mind that keeps you interested. It's your mind that can help you enjoy a happy life. In that book Sheindlin remembers advice given her by her father, a Brooklyn dentist, who told her a bright intellect, a curious mind and a passion for learning were priceless commodities. She says, "*I always thought the worst insult in the world was to be called stupid. Your worth in this world is based on what's up here, not necessarily what's over here (pointing to the face). Beauty fades, dumb is forever.*" As Sheindlin became a lawyer and then a judge, she saw what happened to people who didn't use their heads. In a July 1999 Reader's Digest article, she's quoted: "*The fallout of their stupid decisions was the daily parade of misery that marched through family court. I've heard it all before: 'I didn't think, I didn't mean to . . .' Ignorance of life is not an excuse in my courtroom.*"

On a somewhat related note, I'm reminded of an old 1985 survey of students from eight industrialized countries conducted by George Gallup for the Dallas Times Herald; those schooled in the U. S. ranked either at the bottom or near the bottom of the list in mathematics, science, and geography. Some examples: Only one-fifth of the students tested could even locate the United States on a world map. One-third of the teens could not identify Mexico as the country bordering Texas. 25% were unaware New Jersey is on the East Coast and Oregon is on the West Coast. Asked which were the last two states admitted into the Union, nearly 60% of the answers included either Florida, Mexico, or Canada. Asked what language is most widely spoken in Latin America, over half responded ... you guessed it ... "Latin." You've heard the saying a little knowledge is a dangerous thing? Well, if this survey is any indication, we're in danger!

The saying "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing" basically means a small amount of knowledge often misleads people into thinking they are more expert than they really are, which can indeed be dangerous. The original saying is thought to have come from an essay written by Alexander Pope in 1709 ("*Essay on Criticism*"); this excerpt: "*A little learning is a dang'rous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, And drinking largely sobers us again.*" In Greek mythology, the Pierian spring was sacred to the Muses and believed to have been something of a fountain of knowledge. Shallow draughts, or sips, from the spring of knowledge can be intoxicating to the brain, leading to a false sense of power, authority, know-it-all-ness; we need to keep "drinking" to offset the negative effects of such intoxication. No one can drink enough from the Perian spring; no one can ever know enough.

Paul says in our scripture lesson today: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." It's true. Paul would agree with Alexander Pope; a little knowledge can intoxicate and puff us up. When we know a little we think we are more expert than we are, and we can and often do become disdainful of others we think aren't as enlightened as we (*although they probably know a whole lot more than we do*), and that's just not helpful. Paul encountered people like that in the early church. Many of the recent converts to Christianity in Corinth had been

worshiping idols, and part of their worship involved sacrificing animals to the idols. Afterwards they would feast on that food. This was a social event as well as a religious duty. Should they continue to patronize these feast events after becoming Christian? Certainly, said the know-it-alls. After all, we know idols are an illusion. They aren't real. But the food and the fellowship are still good. What harm could it do to just go ahead and dig in?

Well, Paul saw the possibility of a great deal of harm. What if a new believer, still insecure in his or her faith, saw other professing Christians eating food offered to idols and misunderstood, and thought they still practiced idol-worship even after becoming Christians? Then these newer believers could fall back into the old lifestyles of worshiping idols themselves. So, says Paul to Christians in Corinth, don't let your so-called superior knowledge of faith cause you to be a stumbling block to others. If your knowledge causes you disdain for others, if your knowledge causes you to not be concerned for others, if your knowledge causes you not to care if others misunderstand your motives and your actions, if your knowledge actually gives others cause to sin, then there's something lacking in your knowledge! It's shallow; drink deep! The God who is the source of all knowledge is a God who does not look upon others with disdain, but with love. I believe Paul is saying knowledge without love only puffs up ... it does not build up. Yes, knowledge does serve a purpose; Judge Judy has built a career on drumming common-sense knowledge into the at-times ignorant people parading through her courtrooms. Knowledge is better than ignorance! And if it is true that God is the source of all knowledge, if it is true that Jesus is the Truth, then the more you actually learn about real knowledge and truth, the more you learn about the Source of knowledge and truth. And that Source would have you use your knowledge to lovingly train and instruct and elevate and build up others.

Christians are called to be a people who build up others. It is not our intellect that marks us as a follower of Christ, but the love in our heart. Yes, God gave us our good minds. God intends for us to use those minds to the fullest extent possible. And I think Paul would tell us that would mean the best use of our intellect is to find a way to build up other people. Jesus was an encourager. He lifted people up; He did not put them down. And that is our task as well. We are to be sensitive to the needs of others and find ways to do good for them.

In a wonderful old book **Letters to Phillip** (subtitled: *"On How to Treat A Woman: A plainspoken practical guide to the man's role in love and marriage"*) author Charlie Shedd writes of a woman who suffered a car accident. She called her husband as soon as she could to tell him. Her knowledgeable and practical husband immediately asked, *"How much damage to the car?"* His second question, *"Whose fault was it?"* Following this, he suggested, *"Listen, darling, don't admit a thing! You call the insurance company and I'll call the lawyer. We can beat this thing."* (I can tell by your chuckles and tittering you know the most important question this "knowledgeable" husband failed to ask: "Honey, how are you?") His wife said little until this point. Then, she asked, "Well, do you have any more questions?" "No," he said, "I think that about covers it." "Oh, does it?" She fumed. "In case you're interested, I'm at the hospital with five broken ribs."

Christians are called to be sensitive to the needs of other people, especially those close to them, beginning right at home! Christians are called to be people who build people up, to try to lift them to a higher plane of life, to help them live a higher and a better and a happier life. Christians are called to recognize that everyone needs encouragement in order to be all they can be. I like the story about the woman who brought her new baby to the office. She also had her seven-year-old son with her. Everyone gathered around the baby, and the boy asked, "Mom, may I have some money to buy a soda?" "What do you say?" she asked. Everyone expected him to say, "PLEASE may I have some money to buy a soda?" What he said was: "You're thin and beautiful." The woman reached in her purse and gave him the money. That's a very knowledgeable little boy!

We all need encouragement, don't we? And so do the people we live with, the people we work with, the people we meet each day and the people we worship with. We do this pretty well here, but let's strive to do it better in 2012: let us be an encouraging church that seeks to be filled with the knowledge and the love of God. Again, if my knowledge causes me disdain for others, causes me to not be concerned for others, causes me not to care if others misunderstand my motives and my actions, if my knowledge actually gives others cause to sin, then there's something wrong with my knowledge! It just shows what I don't know. The God who is the source of all knowledge is a God who does not look upon others with disdain, but with love. Little people tear others down. Little people abuse others and take advantage of them. We want to be a congregation of big people, people who want to know a very big and gracious God; as a congregation we want to resolve to be a place where people are built up, not torn down. Where people find positive affirmation, not intimidation. For knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

We have many smart, well-educated people in our congregation and we're thankful for that. Knowledge is much to be preferred over ignorance. But that will not make us a great church. What will make us a great church is when we become a church of encouragers, building one another up with the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.