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Condemning the false prophets. Idol food and the weaker brother.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 23. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people.

You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and I will bring them back to their fold and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

I will set shepherds over them who will care for them and they shall fear no more nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely and this is the name by which he will be

called.

The Lord is our righteousness. Therefore behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer stay as the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but as the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them, then they shall dwell in their own land. Concerning the prophets, my heart is broken within me, all my bones shake.

I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine because of the Lord and because of his holy words. For the land is full of adulterers, because of the curse the land mourns and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course is evil and their might is not right.

Both prophet and priest are ungodly. Even in my house I have found their evil, declares the Lord. Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness into which they shall be driven and fall, for I will bring disaster upon them in the year of their punishment, declares the Lord.

In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavoury thing. They prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray. But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing.

They commit adultery and walk in lies. They strengthen the hands of evil-doers so that no one turns from his evil. All of them have become like Sodom to me and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.

Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets, behold I will feed them with bitter food and give them poisoned water to drink, for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone out into all the land. Thus says the Lord of hosts, do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.

They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, it shall be well with you, and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart they say, no disaster shall come upon you. For who among them has stood in the counsel of the Lord, to see and to hear his word? For who has paid attention to his word and listened? Behold the storm of the Lord, wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest, it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart.

In the latter days you will understand it clearly. I did not send the prophets, yet they ran. I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied.

But if they had stood in my counsel, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their

deeds. Am I a guard at hand, declares the Lord, and not a guard far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him, declares the Lord? Do I not fill heaven and earth, declares the Lord? I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully.

What has straw in common with wheat, declares the Lord? Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Therefore behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who use their tongues and declare, declares the Lord. Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the Lord, and who tell them, and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them.

So they do not profit this people at all, declares the Lord. When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest, asks you, What is the burden of the Lord? You shall say to them, You are the burden, and I will cast you off, declares the Lord. And as for the prophet, priest, or one of the people who says, The burden of the Lord, I will punish that man and his household.

Thus shall you say, every one to his neighbor, and every one to his brother, What has the Lord answered? or What has the Lord spoken? But the burden of the Lord you shall mention no more, for the burden is every man's own word, and you pervert the words of the living God, the Lord of hosts, our God. Thus you shall say to the prophet, What has the Lord answered you? or What has the Lord spoken? But if you say, The burden of the Lord, thus says the Lord, because you have said these words, The burden of the Lord, when I sent to you, saying, You shall not say, The burden of the Lord. Therefore behold, I will surely lift you up, and cast you away from My presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your fathers.

And I will bring upon you everlasting reproach, and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten. Chapters 21 and 22 are particularly addressed to the King of Judah. This body of material is concluded in verses 1-8 of Jeremiah chapter 23.

It presents an indictment of the shepherds of the Lord's flock, especially the kings, but also including other rulers and leaders by extension. There are several similarities between this and Ezekiel chapter 34 and its condemnation of the false shepherds. Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 1-6.

The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds. Thus says the Lord God, Our

shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

In verses 10-16, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered, on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.

And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

The shepherds were also mentioned in the preceding chapter in verse 22. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity. Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil.

Verses 1-8 are a cluster of oracles. Jack Lumbom argues for the presence of three distinct oracles in verses 1-4 alone. Those verses declare woe on the destroying shepherds.

The evil of leaders gets visited upon the people that they lead. Their leadership divides and fails to protect the flock, and also destroys them with their sin and folly. Israel was a flock, and their leaders were shepherds throughout their history.

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob kept sheep. Joseph and his brothers kept sheep. And on account of being shepherds, they were kept apart from the Egyptians.

Moses led Israel out of Egypt like a flock with his shepherd's rod. The Lord called David from the fold to lead his flock of Israel. Having declared woe upon the shepherds, the Lord turns to address the shepherds directly.

One of their tasks, as Lumbom notes, is to call the sheep to account. They have failed in this task, and the Lord will call them to account. The Lord's hand behind this situation is seen in verses 3-4.

While the wickedness and folly of the shepherds was the proximate cause, it was the Lord who drove the flock to other countries. Now he declares his determination to bring them back, to re-establish the flock in their fold, and that they will be fruitful and multiply. We should hear the allusion back to the creation account here.

There is going to be something akin to a new creation situation. In anticipation of this, Israel is instructed to be fruitful and multiply, even in exile, in Jeremiah 29.6. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters, multiply there and do not decrease.

The Lord will establish new righteous shepherds over them, shepherds who will perform the fundamental duties that the false shepherds had neglected in their sin. They will be delivered from fear and from their shame, and they will be made whole as a new people in their land. After the indictments of the royal house to this point, there is now hope of restoration of the people and the monarchy on the other side of exile.

The oracle in verses 5-6 substantially reoccurs in chapter 33 verses 14-16. The re-establishment of David's house and reign is an important theme in a number of prophecies. The condemnation of the false shepherds in Ezekiel chapter 34 also contains this theme in verses 23-24.

And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them, he will be their guard, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord, I have spoken. Here the one who is going to be raised up for the house of David is called a righteous branch.

The same sort of language is used in Zechariah chapter 3 verse 8. Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign. Behold, I will bring my servant the branch, in Zechariah chapter 6 verses 12-13, and say to him, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold the man whose name is the branch, for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord, and shall bear royal honour, and shall sit and rule on his throne.

And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the council of peace shall be between them both. Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 also speaks of something similar, a shoot coming from the stump of Jesse, a branch from his root shall bear fruit. Here the image is of cutting down even below David himself, and so the branch from David is as life from the dead.

David's family tree seems to have been cut off. Indeed, at the end of chapter 22 Jehoiachin seems to be doomed to die without an heir. Matthew chapter 1 suggests that this was overcome, likely through adoption.

The promised king will be good and wise, he will execute justice and righteousness, the fundamental duties of the king. The reference to Judah and Israel also suggests a kingdom that is no longer divided. It will be fulfilled when the Lord has gathered his people from all of the lands to which they have been scattered.

To understand the meaning of the promised king's name, the Lord is our righteousness, we need to recognise that Zedekiah was the last king of Judah. The kingdom of Judah was brought down as he was taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah's name means my righteousness is the Lord, or the Lord is righteousness.

Zedekiah's name stands as an indictment upon him as he failed to live up to it. It promised something great, but it was hollow. However, another Davidic king would arise who would live up to that name.

Christians have generally seen this as a reference ultimately to Christ himself. The oracle of verses 7-8 is very similar to that of chapter 16 verses 14-15. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, As the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but, As the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them, for I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.

The deliverance that the Lord will bring about in the future will eclipse that that he achieved in the past. There is a greater salvation to look forward to, a greater exodus. Jeremiah bears the true word of the Lord, but it is a painful weight to carry.

His body is breaking under it. He is dismayed and shaken by the message, and also by the evil and the corruption of the people and their leaders, and the great opposition that they present to him. He feels keenly the curses falling upon the land as a result of their sin.

The land cannot sustain the people's wickedness, and is suffering terrible judgments. Both priests and prophets were both unfaithful, and their corruption was pervasive, entering even into the Lord's house, and they would face disaster as a result. The prophets of Samaria had led to Israel's downfall.

They had prophesied by Baal, and led the northern kingdom astray, until it was sent away by the Lord. People in the south and Judah might think themselves faithful by contrast, but in verse 14 the prophets of Jerusalem are also condemned for their unfaithfulness and lying ways, and their support of wicked people, presumably especially among the leadership of the land. Jeremiah, as Walter Brueggemann observes, is accused of the opposite of what the false prophets are condemned for here.

In chapter 38 verse 4, Jeremiah, it is claimed, weakens the people's hands, while the false prophets strengthen them in their evil. They support the kings and underwrite with their false prophecies the ruling ideology. The prophets are condemned for adultery, perhaps a reference to sexual sin and infidelity, perhaps a metaphorical reference to idolatry, or perhaps a way of speaking about a more general covenant unfaithfulness, expressed in both their societal and their religious bonds.

They have ended up like Sodom and Gomorrah, and they will face the same fate. The Lord declares that He will feed them bitter food and give them poisoned water to drink. This might be, among other things, an allusion to the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5, applied when a woman was suspected of adultery.

Rather than delivering her to human judgment, the Lord would test the woman himself with a drink of bitter water bearing a curse, a curse which He would bring upon her if she had in fact been unfaithful. The specific nature of the lying words of the false prophets was the declaration of peace. They preached peace, peace to a wicked people for whom there would be no peace.

They were yes-men of the ruling ideology, declaring that no disaster would come upon the people. The faithful and true prophet, like Jeremiah, however, receives his message directly from the Lord, by standing in the counsel of the Lord, the divine counsellors described in various places in scripture, perhaps most notably in 1 Kings chapter 22, when the true prophet Micaiah confronts the false prophets, testifying to what he witnessed in the divine counsel. The false prophets were not sent by the Lord at all, and their messages of peace were quite contrary to the actual truth.

Judgment is decreed for Jerusalem, it's already in motion, and soon enough the false prophets will be exposed. The prophets have declared a domesticated God, a God who underwrites Jerusalem. They name-drop the Lord, but they don't consider that He is hearing their every word.

God isn't contained by the temple walls. He is the transcendent, sovereign, creator God, who is far away, far above the creation, but He also fills heaven and earth. He is not a tame God, but is above all earthly powers, free in His exercise of His majestic might.

He cannot be tethered to Jerusalem, as if on a leash, required to maintain its well-being. There is no hiding place from this God. The prophetic word of the Lord will show up all

the empty words of the prophets.

It is like wheat compared to straw, like the grain that is true food to the crushed stalks that are going to be blown away. It is like fire, it consumes falsehood. It is like the hammer that breaks rock.

The Lord's word, unlike those of false prophets, is powerful and effective. It will make itself known. The false prophets use the familiar formulas, thus declares the Lord, and other things like that.

They claim to have dreams, when they have had no true revelation at all. They may even parrot the words of true prophets, but take them out of context and misdirect them. The collection of prophecies relating to the kings and the prophets concludes with a condemnation of the use of the expression, the burden of the Lord.

The people are forbidden from using it any longer. The expression had become so overused for falsehood that it was dangerous and needed to be taken out of circulation. The burden is a message from the Lord, but the Lord puns upon it by telling Jeremiah to answer those who ask him what the burden of the Lord is, by declaring that they are the burden.

They are the heavy weight that the Lord has to labour under. They are a burden that will eventually, in the end of the chapter, be lifted up and cast away from the Lord's presence, along with their city. Instead of the empty phrase concerning the burden of the Lord, which each prophet has been filling with his own fancies, they should genuinely seek the word of the Lord, not just their own projections.

The Lord is a God who speaks and who answers. He is the God who is the living God. He is not a projection of man, controlled by our ideologies, tethered to our projects, our causes, our countries, or contained by our temples or churches.

He is the free Creator God, the Judge of all, to whom we are all accountable. A question to consider. Can you think of any ways in which we face the danger of claiming that we have the words of the Lord while emptying them out and projecting into them our own sentiments? 1 Corinthians chapter 8 Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge.

This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but One. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed 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. However, not all possess this knowledge.

But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. 1 Corinthians chapter 8 turns to a new issue, food associated with pagan deities or idol meat. There are various ways in which food could be entangled with pagan deities.

Sometimes it would be meat in the marketplace that would have come from pagan sacrifices. Meat could also be eaten in cultic meals, or in meals otherwise associated with pagan temples and their gods. In some such cases there might be the sense of eating in the presence of the deity, and wealthy Corinthians would likely have been invited to meals in dining places associated with temples.

This was an issue in the early church, we see it in Acts chapter 15 verses 19-20 and 28-29. Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.

If you keep yourselves from these you will do well. Farewell. And then in Revelation chapter 2 verse 20.

But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. All of us possess knowledge, seems to be a statement of the Corinthians, and Paul here provisionally presents this viewpoint as if he agreed with it for his rhetorical purposes before going on to subvert it. We should likely also read knowledge here as if in scare quotes as Paul's following statements seem to support.

The Corinthians supposed knowledge probably had a lot to do with their supposed super-

spirituality. They likely believe that they can eat food associated with pagan deities with no problem whatsoever, believing that the pagan deities are not real and that it is just meat. They might even be purposefully eating pagan meat to make the point, to display their knowledge.

Yet such knowledge merely puffs people up, it makes them feel self-important and superior. Love, however, builds up. It has substance and genuineness to it.

Love, in contrast to such knowledge, is concerned for the effects of our actions upon others, upon weaker brethren. The Corinthians' knowledge is selfish, individualistic, and self-important, but love seeks the good of the community. And those who think that they have achieved this sort of knowledge haven't yet come to know as they ought to know.

True knowledge is achieved in the way of love. The Corinthians might regard their triumphalistic knowledge as a spiritual gift, but Paul contrasts it with a coming to know that is characterised by growth in love, which is a more humble and a humbling process. Anthony Thistleton suggests that we should follow some manuscripts which exclude the reference to God in verse 3, and that would read, If anyone loves, he has experienced true knowing.

The alternative, the more common reading, again privileges love, as something directed to God, and as something that is related to the priority of God's act of knowing, rather than our own. Similar expressions of the priority of God's knowing over ours can be found in places like 1 Corinthians 13, verse 12, For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

And then in Galatians 4, verse 9, But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God. Our knowledge of God, then, proceeds from, and responds to, his prior loving knowledge of us. Not only does Christianity have a way of wisdom, a way that's associated with Christ and the mindset of the cross, it also has a way of knowing, a way of knowing that's characterised by love.

True knowledge is arrived at through the act of love, and a so-called knowledge that is not loving will not produce any sort of true knowing. Paul goes on to affirm, at least in principle, the Corinthians' knowledge that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one. He shares these convictions, but he goes on to show how they play out differently in his thinking than they do in the Corinthians.

For even if, for the sake of argument, there are many gods in heaven and earth, just as there are many for which the status of gods or lords are claimed, for the Christian there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. And there is an underlying question here. Are the gods of the idols real, or only imagined? And Paul's point might seem to align with the sort of statements that we find in Isaiah, where idols and their

makers are ridiculed as powerless to save and vain, as if they were nothing.

However, elsewhere in Scripture one might get the impression that there really are false gods in the world. Paul returns to this issue in chapter 10 verses 19-21, where his position becomes clearer. What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons, and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

The false gods are vain, and they are not what they claim to be, and God has proven his actual power over their empty boasts. However, this does not mean that powerful demonic forces aren't at work in the world. The weak brothers might ascribe far too much power to these demonic forces and these false gods, and the strong far too little.

The strong rightly recognize their vanity and their emptiness, but the weak recognize their power. Both are only seeing part of the picture though, and Paul wants to emphasize both aspects. In verse 6, Paul quotes and elaborates the fundamental claim of the Jewish faith, the Shema.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. However, Paul has taken this statement and has inserted Christ into this fundamental confession. The term God relates to the Father, and the term Lord to Jesus Christ, but they are held together in indivisible unity.

There's one God, but the identity of this one God includes both Christ and the Father. The Father and Jesus Christ are, however, distinguished by the prepositions applied to them. All things are from and for the Father, and all things are through Christ.

This helps us to understand the Trinity in part, how the triune persons can be one and their actions inseparable. It is not that the triune persons divide the work out between them, like a division of labor. Rather, every single act of God is done by all of God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

Every act of God is from the Father, every act of God is through the Son, every act of God is in the Spirit. Each of the divine persons is the author of every work of God in its entirety, and the one undivided God is active in every single one of the divine works. We're seeing a very sophisticated theology emerging here.

For Paul's argument, the fact that all things are from the Father and through Christ challenges the idea that there is any such thing, or could be any such thing, as an alternative deity with autonomous power to exert in the world. Whatever the false gods might be, whatever the idols that people worship, they are of an utterly different order of reality than the one true God. The one true God is the creator and sustainer of all things,

and they are merely dependent creatures.

The problem for many of the weak, who presumably had lower social standing, was that they had former associations with idols. They see idol food as offered to a real false deity. They may want to go along with the strong, who presumably had higher social standing, that's part of what the word strength means, and a sense of knowledge.

They might have invited them to come along to some of these feasts, but they are compromised in their self-awareness, and as they go against their consciences, they end up being wounded in their faith and going astray. Paul makes clear that neither eating nor refraining from eating advantages someone before God. Exerting a supposed right to eat food is not going to make you better off before God, nor is abstaining.

He warns against the strong supposed right to choose, and the way in which that supposed liberty could actually cause the weak to stumble. It might be that the strong wanted to encourage the weak into exerting supposed knowledge in eating food sacrificed to idols. However, the weak would end up eating the food while feeling the cultic force of what was taking place.

They would feel confused and be wounded in their conscience as a result, feeling that they were actually showing some sort of homage to the false deities. It is one thing to believe that the food of the marketplace isn't defiled by virtue of weaker supposed associations with idols. It is another to aggressively assert one's knowledge in a manner unmindful of and unloving towards brothers and sisters who could be wounded by it.

And this wounding of conscience, together with the confusion that could be caused, would actually lead to weaker brothers' faith even being shipwrecked in some way. While the strong might be seeking to build the weak into the same confidence that they enjoyed, the effect was actually destructive. And what's worse, Christ died for the weaker brother, whose spiritual well-being the strong have treated with such carelessness.

The result is that they are sinning against Christ. Paul's approach then is against the proud individualism that would ride roughshod over others' weak consciences for the sake of their higher knowledge. He would rather not exert freedoms that he genuinely possessed for the sake of the well-being of the weaker brother.

Love is prioritised over proud knowledge. A question to consider, what are some of the broader implications of the fact that the way of true knowledge is through love?