

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

6 Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. 7 But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.

12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

13 And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

14 Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

15 Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

16 “For who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ.

THE REMOVAL OF YOUR MIND

I want to focus on that last line today. “We have the mind of Christ.”

What does that mean?

In an effort to explore that theme at Bible study, I asked one of our members to read a cross reference to Paul’s letter to the Romans (12:2).

That verse read, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

But, the Bible study member made a slight mistake in her reading. She read, “Be transformed by the removal of your minds!” It sounded like a call to have a spiritual lobotomy!

We had a good laugh about that mistake, and I also asked her permission to use this in my sermon because that mistake reflects what many people actually believe.

They think that spirituality is the removal of our minds. They think that faith and intellectual rigor are mutually exclusive.

And passages like our lesson for today are often used to reinforce that misconception. When Paul talks about faith not resting on lofty words of wisdom, some take this to mean that we should avoid any worldly wisdom, as if it might contaminate true faith.

Many of us have witnessed the elevation of ignorance in the church from time to time. It is not a pretty sight.

THE LIMITS OF WISDOM

Let’s be clear about one thing this morning. Paul is not telling the Corinthians that they should abandon wisdom.

He is just telling them that some questions that can’t be answered by scientists or philosophers or politicians or even religious leaders. And if we put our ultimate trust in the world’s wisdom, we will be disappointed.

Ultimate answers have to come from a higher source.

I think the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes makes this point brilliantly. The preacher in that book talks about all the things he tried to make himself happy.

He tried the pleasure principle. Some said that we should eat, drink and be merry. He tried it. He threw a big Super Bowl party each year. He just got fat. What was the point?

Some said that if you made a lot of money you would be happy. He tried it. He made a lot of money but then he realized that he couldn't take that money to the grave. One day his children would inherit it and waste it all. What was the point?

Some said that if you got a good education it was something that no one could take away from you. He tried it. He was an excellent scholar. But, he grew weary of study and one day it dawned on him that all that hard-earned knowledge would soon be snatched away by the sands of time. What was the point?

Those who think that politics or pleasure or money or power or even religion will provide the answers they need are sorely mistaken. In the final analysis, the wisdom of this world will lead to foolish and tragic mistakes.

And the primary example of that for Paul was the fact that God loved the world so much that he sent his son into the world. And what did the world do? They crucified him. (1 Corinthians 2:8)

The rulers of this world were foolish. They crucified the Lord of glory.

Now, you might say, "Oh that was then. We're different now."

Really? I would suggest that if Jesus came in our day and age his message would be rejected, and he would be rejected. Why? Because the message of Jesus seems just as foolish to the world today as it did yesterday.

BARMEN

Yesterday, I taught a class for Presbytery on the Book of Confessions, the statements of faith that our church has adopted as our official standards. One of those confessions, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, was written during a time of great political and social change in Germany.

In a time of economic depression and mass unemployment Adolf Hitler was able to take control of the government. He took over the courts, smashed labor unions, censored publications, persecuted the Jews and obtained the support of many church leaders.

The historical preface to that Confession puts it this way,

“Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth.

The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.”

Barmen in essence restated one of the most ancient creeds of the church. Jesus is Lord.

(And by the way Caesar and Hitler are not Lord.)

It’s important to remember that the Germans of this era were very wise as the world measures wisdom. They had some of the best scientists. They had some of the best philosophers. They had some of the best theologians.

And yet this wisdom did not prevent most of them from going down a path that was tragically flawed.

Just as the rulers of the world crucified Jesus so the rulers in the 1930s followed Hitler and in essence crucified the faith for economic and political gain.

How could this have happened? Never underestimate the power of idolatry. We often believe what we want to believe, and that enables others to twist the faith to suit their own purposes.

Remember why the religious leaders had Jesus crucified. His power and popularity made him a political threat. It was for the good of the country that Jesus had to die.

WORLDLY WISDOM STILL A THREAT

In 1967 the United Presbyterian Church decided to include Barmen in a Book of Confessions that represented the history of the Reformed tradition.

Why did they include this brief Confession on a somewhat limited topic?

Perhaps it is because this Confession and the history behind it represent a very real threat to the Christian faith even today.

There is still the temptation to make the limited wisdom of the world into an ultimate word of faith.

There is still the temptation to place our faith in money or pleasure or the power of military might.

There is still the temptation to equate patriotic sentiments with Christian truth.

All of these idolatries are alive and well in our world today. And yet we often act as if they do not exist. In some cases, we even glorify and Christianize the very opposite of what Jesus taught.

It is as if someone has given us a spiritual lobotomy. We have lost our mind.

How do we regain our senses? How can we get our mind straight?

How can we claim the promise of Scripture that we have the mind of Christ?

What Paul says in this passage suggests several options.

HUMILITY

First, we must approach our task with humility. After reading the letters of Paul I always imagined him to be someone who was supremely confident.

But, this passage suggests another side to the Apostle.

He told the boastful and brash Corinthians that he did not come preaching fancy sermons. He came to them with a sense of weakness and fear.

Instead of relying upon his own words the Apostle relied upon the Spirit of God to give him the wisdom that he needed. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Paul was a man of great accomplishment.

He studied under the best rabbis.

He was a righteous man who kept the law.

He was a religious leader who wanted to stamp out heresy. He did not want to dilute God's word in any way.

But, in his letter to the Philippians Paul stated that none of these accomplishments were important. They were rubbish in comparison to his relationship with Christ.

Paul was quite happy to lay down all of his trophies at the feet of his Savior.

NOT HUMBLE

Unfortunately, the Christians at Corinth were not willing to do that. They thought that their brand of Christianity was more enlightened and vital and exciting than any one else's faith.

They thought that they were the ones who had all the answers. And because of their arrogance the Corinthian Church fell into theological error and moral decline.

There is one thing that Christians everywhere could do to follow Jesus more closely. We could be a bit more modest in our claims.

We could come to God and the tasks God gives us with a sense of weakness and fear. We could leave a place open in our hearts and minds for the work of the Spirit.

We could admit that when it comes to the future we certainly don't have all the answers, but we are confident God will provide us with what we need when we need it.

GOD'S WISDOM

A second thing this passage suggests is that we need to distinguish between the wisdom of the world and God's wisdom. The wisdom of the world is temporary and flawed in many ways.

God's wisdom is eternal and perfect.

It is not the kind of wisdom we can obtain on our own. It is a wisdom that is revealed by God.

It is a holy mystery. It is the mystery of Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

We've been talking about that mystery these past few weeks. When you look at the cross you see the sacrificial love of God. You see a God who cares passionately for God's people.

That is wisdom.

And it is what people really need. They need to know about a Savior who sacrifices everything. They need to know about passion and forgiveness.

And that's why we have communion often. It reminds us in a graphic way of this wisdom.

Body broken and blood shed cannot be equated to any wisdom the world knows. The elements are a visible sign of Christ and him crucified.

A SAVIOR WHO BLEEDS FOR US

Frederick Buechner told of seeing his daughter get up one morning. She ran down the stairs in their home, ran over to the refrigerator, and opened the door. She reached in and she got a glass of water and a carrot stick.

She was 15 years old. He thought that when she had this most unusual breakfast she was just being a teenager.

Tragically he was wrong.

Three years later Buechner's daughter was in a hospital. She had a tube in her stomach. They were force-feeding her to keep her alive because of severe anorexia.

Those were dark days for their family.

They would go to church in those days expecting to hear something that would be helpful, but so often when they were really hurting and really needed God, they would hear a preacher preach some three point sermon and close it with a poem.

They'd hear Hebrew words and Greek words come and go.

But, what they really wanted he said was a pastor who would stand up there and bleed with them because they hurt so badly.

That's why the cross is so important. We do have a Savior who will hang up there and bleed for us. We do have a God who leads with a spirit of compassion.

His wisdom is the wisdom of sacrifice. His wisdom is the wisdom of undeserved forgiveness that takes our guilt away.

This is the Savior to whom we point.

GOOD NEWS

The gospel is not good advice. The gospel is not worldly wisdom that encourages us to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps. The gospel is good news.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We have a Savior who knows what it is to be human ... to be tempted, to experience despair, to bleed and die.

And yet in the middle of all that pain he offers forgiveness, even to his enemies.

This is the good news. This is the wisdom of God.

CRAZY LIKE JESUS

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In Jesus Christ we have hope ... not only for this life but also for the life to come.

When Jesus walked this earth there were some (including his own family) who thought that he had lost his mind. Many tried to get him to take a more practical moderate way.

But, he refused.

Instead, he insisted that they love their enemies and do good to those who persecuted them. He insisted that they follow him all the way to the cross.

It seemed like such a foolish thing to do at the time. It seemed crazy. You would have thought that the disciples who left everything and followed him were out of their minds.

But, as it turned out, they had the mind of Christ. They had the wisdom of God.

The season of Lent is coming soon. Once again we are invited to go with Jesus on the way to the cross.

May God once again fill us with the wisdom of the cross.

Amen.