

Show
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In the time of the Apostle Paul, churches like the one in Corinth from this morning's reading were largely lay led. Occasionally they would be visited by a wandering preacher. The preacher would stay and preach her or his understanding of the faith for a week, or a month, or maybe more, and then be off again to visit the next church. Different preachers could—and often did—offer radically different takes on their shared faith. There was no established tradition for Christianity yet. And the variety of different interpretations of the faith sometimes challenged the formation or cohesion of the early Christian communities. Different people would be drawn to different understandings about what it meant to be Christian. Certain preachers might win people over by the strength of their style or by their apparent intelligence, learnedness, or personal charisma.

Paul called those ways of preaching “lofty words or wisdom,” or “*human wisdom*.”¹ Paul is not too fond of this so-called human wisdom. Throughout today's reading he repeatedly contrasts human wisdom and God's wisdom. The problem Paul has with human wisdom is that it is finite and inconsistent. It varies from person to person. Paul's human wisdom might be different from Mary's, or Tadd's, or yours. Any one of us might be able to make a plausible argument to persuade others of our perspective. If a sermon went well, we might even convince you that one of us actually knew God better than the others.

So, Paul ups the stakes—it isn't what you *know*, says Paul, it is what you *show*. Anyone can learn how to make a persuasive philosophical argument; but the real goal for disciples is to demonstrate the Spirit of God at work in your life. And this is a call to everyone who calls themselves Christian. We are called on to *show* how God is at work in our lives. Not just to talk a good game, but to provide “a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that...faith might rest not on human wisdom but on *the power of God*.”²

Accordingly, Paul resolved to be simple and direct when he was with the Corinthians. No lofty words or wisdom for him; no philosophical or rhetorical style—just basic, earnest witnessing. For he decided to know only “Jesus Christ and him crucified,”³ while he was among them.

Taking this as an example for us; what does that mean, exactly? Do we ceaselessly retell the story of Christ's crucifixion? Would *that* show forth the Spirit at work in our hearts? That *has* long been an essential piece of the Christian tradition—to witness to that mysterious event of the Crucifixion. It is both the immanent expectation looming over the first Communion, *and* the gateway to the Easter story which is the essential “Alleluia!” that rings throughout the collective Christian year and individual Christian lives. But how do we demonstrate it in addition to telling the story? How do we show “Jesus Christ and him crucified” in our lives?

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:1, 5.

² 1 Corinthians 2:4b-5.

³ 1 Corinthians 2:3.

Paul offers one possibility when he says that he went among the Corinthians “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.”⁴ Weakness, fear and trembling are not impressive. None of these things is self-assured, like a terrific sermon or great philosophical talk might be. But they *are* all honest, and quite common symptoms, of having encountered God in a vital and life changing way. Now, brother Paul is a particular sort of Christian. He was a mystic, and prone to intense encounters with God. Not all of us can say the same. Most of us have simpler relationships with God. So what about the rest of us? How can we witness to God in weakness? And do we really want to? Doesn’t it sound kind of...well wimpy, or at least odd?

Consider what weakness meant in Paul’s time. To Gentiles and Jews alike it often meant helping someone who was considered off limits, or beneath you. Jews may have steered clear of helping Gentiles. Of course, Gentiles tended to oppress them, so there was a certain logic to it; a certain “human wisdom.” For their part, ancient Gentiles were wrapped up in fairly rigid class codes that kept them apart from one another and encouraged them to think of themselves as above other people. Again, there was a structure there—a so-called wisdom. So, it might be considered weak to cross those boundaries that kept humans apart; at least from a human view. But Christ showed a different way. He crossed every boundary he could. He crossed boundaries so often that he got everyone riled up at one time or another. But he also promoted greater human understanding and love. And *that* showed God’s power. What human wisdom pulled apart, God’s wisdom reconciled. What human beings may have reckoned as weakness, Jesus showed to be strength.

So, what of fear and trembling? The Hebrew Scriptures speak of the fear of God often. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”⁵ says the first chapter of Proverbs; and many Psalms and prophets echo it. Trembling is a close companion to that Holy fear, or better still—that Holy awe, and an outward sign that there is something powerful going on in a person. Both Holy awe and trembling are fingers which point toward an awe-inspiring God, and away from human differences.

And that is Paul’s point I think: simply not to get so wrapped up in our own wisdom or power that we lose sight of God’s. God is not some great orator or philosopher. God is a loving power who works toward reconciling us with one another. Even with those people who seem wiser than us, or less wise. And to get closer to God we need to embrace and share our awe and love of God. Human wisdom can be persuasive, but it is God’s wisdom that transforms lives and shows through them. And praise be to God, we *can* receive Holy Wisdom both from striving to cross the boundaries erected by human foolishness, and directly from God. Each of us is able to receive “the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.”⁶ May God bless us to continue to work to show this forth in our lives together and in the world.

Amen?

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:3.

⁵ Proverbs 1:7a.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:12.

1 Corinthians 2:1-13

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

⁶Yet 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. ⁷But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, 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"— ¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Now 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. ¹³And 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.

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