

Foolish Wisdom
United Church of Broomfield
February 9, 2020

1 Corinthians 2:1-16 (The Message, edited)

1-2 You'll remember, friends, that when I first came to you to share the testimony of God, I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified.

3-5 I was unsure of how to go about this and felt totally inadequate—I was scared to death, if you want the truth of it—and so nothing I said could have impressed you or anyone else. But the Message came through anyway. God's Spirit and God's power did it, which made it clear that your life of faith is a response to God's power, not to some fancy mental or emotional footwork by me or anyone else.

6-10 We, of course, have plenty of wisdom to pass on to you once you get your feet on firm spiritual ground, but it's not popular wisdom, the fashionable wisdom of high-priced experts that will be out-of-date in a year or so. God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of God's purposes. You don't find it lying around on the surface. It's not the latest message, but more like the oldest—what God determined as the way to bring out his best in us, long before we ever arrived on the scene. The experts of our day haven't a clue about what this eternal plan is. If they had, they wouldn't have killed the Lord of Glory on a cross. That's why we have this Scripture text:

No one's ever seen or heard anything like this,
Never so much as imagined anything quite like it—
What God has arranged for those who love God.
But you've seen and heard it because God, through the Spirit, has brought it all out into the open before you.

10-13 The Spirit, not content to flit around on the surface, dives into the depths of God, and brings out what God planned all along. Whoever knows what you're thinking and planning except you yourself? The same with God—except that God not only knows what God's thinking, but God lets us in on it. God offers a full report on the gifts of life and salvation that God is giving us. We don't have to rely on the world's guesses and opinions. We didn't learn this by reading books or going to school; we learned it from God, who taught us person-to-person through Jesus, and we're passing it on to you in the same firsthand, personal way.

14-16 The unspiritual, just as it is by nature, can't receive the gifts of God's Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit seem like so much foolishness, because the unspiritual have no capacity for them. Spirit can be known only by spirit—God's Spirit and our spirits in open communion. Spiritually alive, we have access to everything God's Spirit is doing, and can't be judged by unspiritual

critics. Isaiah's question, "Is there anyone around who knows God's Spirit, anyone who knows what God is doing?" has been answered: Christ knows, and we have Christ's Spirit.

Sin runs rampant in our society. Daily newspaper and television reports of overcrowding of prisons, xenophobia, terrorism, corrupt politicians, and ruthless warlords attest to that fact and fill the world with violence, hatred and corruption. Reading, hearing and perhaps even experiencing these situations first-hand, we begin to understand the necessity for God's judgment. We may even find ourselves wishing for vengeance by any means upon the violent offenders, the liars and abusers. Surely, they are beyond redemption! Just suppose that God told you to take The Word to the worst of these offenders, how would you react?

In the Bible Jonah was given this very task. He was told to go to a place called Nineveh. Nineveh was the Capitol of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians had flaunted their power, before God and the rest of the world through countless acts of heartless cruelty. When Jonah received the Word of the Lord to go to Nineveh, he began to run as hard and as fast as his little legs would carry him - in the opposite direction.

His journey took him to the belly of a whale and other points until he decided he would be better off delivering the message. Jonah knew no one deserved the grace of God less than the dreaded Assyrians. That is not why he did not want to go. He knew that even with his weak preaching, the power contained in the message would help the Assyrians to turn away from their sin and worship God. But - Jonah hated the Assyrians and he wanted vengeance not mercy, to fall on them. Jonah, as human as ever, struggled with accepting God's foolish wisdom versus his own.

Paul did not use a philosophical approach to preaching. Scholars say Paul was not a textual or topical preacher. He was an expositor of the Word of God. Paul did not use pretty words or pretty speech. Paul did not come from the worlds of wisdom and intellect. He came declaring the testimony of God.

What is a testimony? It is a declaration or statement made to establish a fact. The fact that Paul preached, was that they had crucified Jesus. Something before which had never been preached. In the Old Testament they always alluded to it as shown through prophecy. The revealing of the actual event was something new altogether.

Paul did not enter into philosophical debates that caused arguments. He preached the Cross of Christ. A crucified savior. One who died for the sins of the world. A message intellectuals saw as naïve and foolish.

Paul begins to open his heart and allows us to look inside at his innermost thoughts. He makes it perfectly clear that when he was with the Corinthians he was scared. He came to them in weakness and fear, and with much trembling (v. 3). It was no wonder that he could say God had chosen the weak things of this world. Paul did not hold himself in very high esteem, even though he had quite the intellect and was a great person in many ways. He relied purely on the wisdom of God and faith in the Spirit.

Today we have libraries full of human knowledge and information and even some wisdom. There is a great deal of “preaching” being done in the world, but not much is done with a demonstration like that of the spirit’s power (v. 4). Many of those properly educated and learned folks who desperately try to “win over converts” and who so vehemently try to convince others that their Christianity is the right one, think that the right method, topic, style or argument is all that they need. In actuality what they need is the Holy Spirit and the foolish wisdom of God. When one comes to faith in Christ through the power of God, then their faith lies in the power and wisdom of God. If one believes in Christ simply because of the wisdom of humans, they were convinced, then their faith lies in the wisdom of man – and we must ask if that is a strong enough foundation.

Paul says that his wisdom doesn’t come from man’s wisdom. He talks about God’s secret wisdom and how it has been hidden. It is a secret and hidden because it is given only to those who believe. It is not the popular or fashionable wisdom of the psychics. When Jesus spoke His parables and He told the disciples that the vast majority of people would not understand them, it was because He was giving them the direction that the Kingdom of Heaven was headed. Jesus revealed all that had been hidden and for many it seemed naïve and was a challenge to understand.

In this letter to the Corinthians Paul takes hold of this word, secret, and tells them that these truths revealed have always been there. However, mere human wisdom could not discover them. Human wisdom can understand God’s wisdom only through the revelation of Christ.

The late Mel Ellis, was an expert on wildlife and conservation. Before his death he wrote a book entitled, Sermons in Stone: Inspirational Fables for Today. They were fables that examined the problems and satisfactions of daily life. The final fable of the book is a conversation between him and his daughter:

Daughter: Now that I have read your fables, I am disappointed because you have given no space to a new morality.

Father: Well, there are many, many things I did not touch on. As for morality, almost every generation claims a new morality. It is a vagary.

Daughter: I'm not quite sure I understand.

Father: Consider the climbing vines. Honeysuckle, for instance, always twines clockwise, to its right. Jasmine always twines counterclockwise, to its left. Nothing can make either do otherwise. Yet there is one twining plant, Scyphanthus Elegans, which will start turning in one direction, making a couple of loops around its support, and then go back the other way, reversing itself every couple of loops or so.

Daughter: Well it would seem that is the most interesting way to climb.

Father: Most interesting, perhaps, but not a very tidy system.

Daughter: I still don't get the point.

Father: The point is that no matter how vines climb, whether to the left or to the right, or both ways, each is always seeking the same thing.

Daughter: And that is?

Father: Light.

The rulers of his age did not understand who Jesus was because they were not willing to understand God's wisdom. It is the same today. People do not understand God's wisdom because they are not willing to understand who Jesus is....what he taught.

Many people say that we will be able to get all the answers when we get to heaven and everything will be revealed to us. What Paul is actually trying to tell us is that we already get much of our information through our eyes. We learn from our ears. When we combine both our eyes and our ears, we learn a great deal.

What do you think Paul is trying to tell us, when he says, "We cannot even begin to see, hear or even think about what God has in store for the believer that truly loves God?" God has so much in store for each and every one of us! All we have to do is allow God's love and foolish wisdom to flow freely through our lives. We are the ones who put limitations on God's love – we think we're so smart – we know best. When we put limitations on God's love, it puts limitations on God in our lives.

The things God has prepared for our lives are not just received through our eyes, ears, or mind. The Spirit becomes our teacher. We can learn many things by reading the Bible like history, poetry, or a manual on how to live our lives but the Spirit, it is the Spirit that reveals the deep things of God!

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We can understand each other because we have human spirits. I know how you feel when you trip and fall down. It is embarrassing, right? One snowy morning a man was coming out of his house to empty two smaller trash bins into the larger trash cans in the alley behind his house. He carried one in each hand and carefully he crept on the snowy surface, but halfway there he slipped and fell. He held onto the smaller bins and surprisingly didn't spill out anything, nor did he hurt himself. He got up and looked all around. He wanted to see if anyone had seen him. Why did he do that? He was embarrassed. We all know exactly how he felt. We can all imagine how he looked. We would have probably laughed had we seen him. We have the spirit of humans and we know how it feels.

We on the other hand don't really know how God feels, we can only guess. If we truly want to understand how God feels, God will reveal it to us. We can only understand the mysteries of God if we allow the Spirit to be our teacher. God is just waiting for us to say the word and God will begin.

Paul says that in today's scripture when he talks about using words of the spirit. He explains how the unspiritual cannot receive the things of God, because the things of the spirit are foolishness to the unspiritual. If you are not a believer, then what he is saying is foolishness to you. God says that the preaching of the cross for salvation is foolishness to the unspiritual because it does not make sense to them. For the intellectual, human mind, it seems like a Catch-22. That's the mystery of God.

In speaking to the Corinthians, Paul was dealing with many factions in the Corinthian church. There were contradictory accounts regarding Jesus' message, how to interpret it, how to live it and how to instruct others on it. There were questions as to who had true authority – Paul, Cephas, Apollos and others. It wasn't much different than today, where we have dozens of Christian denominations all espousing a faith in Jesus, but ironically all are declaring "right knowledge and right practice," proclaiming different ways to worship. What's right? Who do you believe?

Paul could have said, "Look, I'm the one you ought to be listening to. My knowledge and my experience more than justify me as the rightful preacher with the right ways to "BE" the church." But feeling inadequate and fearful, with great humility and true wisdom Paul said, "Look, it's not about me. I'm not 'the right' preacher. My words aren't 'my words.' This is God's Word – THE Word. It is all about Jesus crucified. I only know about eternal life because of the Spirit of God. It's nothing that can be learned from reading a book, but only through relationship with God. It has nothing to do with intellect and everything to do with faith.

Intelligence is a great thing. Life can be so much easier, when we're knowledgeable, there's no denying that. But when it comes to knowing and understand God, intelligence routinely plays

second fiddle to faith. As for God, we can only know so much from a book...from what humans say ----- there comes a point, in order to fully understand the wisdom of God, we need to have faith in a foolish, crucified Christ.

Paul Achtemeier, former professor of Bible Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Seminary, said, "The person in the pulpit does not have power to create faith in the hearers. Preachers bear testimony to the best of their ability, but it is ultimately a work of the Holy Spirit to write God's truth upon people's hearts and bring them to faith."¹

Regardless of what Paul said to the Corinthians...regardless of what I say to you...only the Holy Spirit can fan the flames of faith between you and God, so that you can know God's deepest feelings and desires for your life and salvation. God and the Holy Spirit work in their own ways regardless of what any preacher does or says.

So I testify and say to you ...

- welcome the foolishness of God's wisdom into your hearts and lives
- believe that which the world says is unpopular
- practice extravagant welcoming and acceptance of others despite what some may say
- seek the Light!

The gifts of the Spirit cannot be contained or restricted by anyone or anything and with whatever fears or inadequacies you may feel you have, know that you have everything you need to know God's foolish wisdom ... and experience the unimaginable depths of God's love.

AMEN

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*