

“Know Nothing”  
1 Corinthians 2: 1 - 5  
Makemie Presbyterian Church  
May 30, 2010 Trinity Sunday

Paul is speaking:

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

This ends our reading this morning.

I recently read an article in the *Washington Post* about Saddleback Community Church in Southern California, which attracts more than twenty thousand people to its services on Sunday. What is their secret? They listened to unchurched people who wanted padded seats instead of pews, a live band instead of an organ & less emphasis on threatening images like the cross. It gives some of us older mainline Christians the willies, but it works. Who can argue with twenty thousand people?

Meanwhile, many of our denominations are responding to the crisis by putting more tools into the hands of church leaders. Almost any week of the year, I can attend a workshop on organizational management, small group dynamics, conflict resolution or church growth. I can learn how to use business techniques like market studies, demographics; mass mailings & telemarketing to increase church membership.

There is also a revival of interest in preaching, with dozens of well-attended conferences each year and a growing number of publications on preaching. Even liturgical churches, which have traditionally ranked preaching behind sacraments, are paying more attention to the role of the sermon in the life of the church.

All of these developments & especially the last one have given me reason to think hard about all the things we do to get people into church. Does the end justify the means, or are we playing a dangerous game with the gospel, by substituting our own expertise for the power of God?

Every time I hear a minister talk about how the Holy Spirit influenced their sermon, or decision, or conversation I immediately think “ut oh, hear it comes.” And I wonder what Paul would say about this if he was in attendance and heard it. I imagine him saying, “What are you doing here, with your own intentions plastered all over the place? This was never supposed to be about you. Sakes alive! When you get through preaching, the only name on anyone’s lips should be the name of Jesus Christ.”

That was the standard Paul held himself to anyhow. “When I came to you,” he wrote the church at Corinth, “I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ & him crucified.” He came to them in weakness & much trembling. He would not dazzle them even if he could, so that their faith would rest not on his wisdom but on the power of God.

We don't know for sure what all of Paul's limitations were, but he & everyone else knew he had them. In the first place, there was that mysterious thorn in the flesh that gave him so much trouble & in the second place, well, he wasn't all that great a preacher. He knew what some people said about him – that he was strong on paper but weak in person, with contemptible speech (2 Corinthians 10:10).

According to a second-century source, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, he was a man of small stature, with bald head & crooked legs... with eyebrows meeting & nose somewhat hooked.”

But not all of his limits were given. This is the same Paul who founded at least seven churches & wrote thirteen eloquent letters that are quoted to this day. The book of Acts contains several of his speeches – which are anything but contemptible – along with the names of those who were converted by hearing him.

At least some of his limits, then, were chosen. Paul could impress a crowd as well as anyone could, but on the whole he held back, because as far as he was concerned, any preacher who won a following by wooing them with grand ideas & thrilling language was guilty of fraud. There was nothing exalted about Christ's life & death, he said, unless you had the faith to see through them. To stand up in

front of people twirling your tongue about them was to parade a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel.

There is nothing in that gospel about being impressive or successful. There is nothing in it about being the biggest or the best at anything at all. The good news of God in Christ is that when the bottom has fallen out from under you – when you have crashed through all your safety nets & you can hear the bottom rushing up to meet you –the good news is that you cannot fall farther than God can catch you. But we can't be too picky about where the catch happens. Sometimes it happens after the funeral is over, as it did with Jesus, but the good news he brought back to us can never be revoked.

God is stronger than death. Way past where we can see how it works, God is able to take our weakness, our fear, our trembling & turn it into fullness of life.

Some of us get so excited about this news that we begin to think it **is** about us. Somewhere in the dark tunnels of our minds we turn God's power to save us into our own power to prosper & a sly kind of thinking slips into our words about God. We look to numbers & dollar signs of our success instead of to the holiness of our life together. We build theatres instead of churches, where religious

entertainment takes the place of worship. If we are not careful, we may start to sound like spiritual big shots, who speak of God's power, the power of the Holy Spirit as if it were the power to make us healthy, wealthy & wise; when of course it's nothing of the sort.

The power of God is now & has always been the power to raise us from the dead. Period. It is not about us. It is about God. Our only role is to stick our feet straight up in the air & admit that without God we might as well be put to bed with a shovel.

Now that's a message that can empty a church out fast.

"Hello. It is so lovely to see you all here this morning. My message this morning will be brief & to the point. God is not in the business of protecting us from harm & no amount of good behavior will keep us safe. For evidence of this, see the cross.

"Instead, God is in the business of restoring us to life, which may involve some painful procedures. If we are willing to go through it & the operation is successful, our lives won't belong to us anymore. We will be God's gifts to the world & our 'to do' lists will have no end. If the operation is *really* successful, our good works will get us killed. And a P.S. But every day will be full of fresh astonishment & we will never, ever get bored."

It is not a message that sells very well, because it runs counter to most human wisdom – which is, wisely enough, about how to make it in this world.

The message of the cross, on the other hand, is about how to stop trying to make it in this world & fall in love with God instead. It is about God's power, not ours, which is why Paul was so suspicious of powerful preachers.

Some of you students of the sixties may remember Marshall McLuhan's slogan, "the medium is the message," by which he meant that what someone says is only as convincing as how that person says it. Paul never read McLuhan, but he knew the same thing. To speak of Christ's painful surrender to God in loud, confident tones is a contradiction in terms. To have a garland put around your own neck for preaching about his self-sacrifice is crazy making.

Imagine, if you will, that Mother Teresa had a spokesman who was so good at what he did that he was in great demand, going from town to town eating big suppers & sleeping in fine hotels as he spoke about her work with the dying paupers of Calcutta. What is wrong with this picture?

The cross is such a hard, hard piece of the gospel that most of us can't stay converted to it for long. It is God's wisdom after all, "secret & hidden, which God has decreed before the ages for our glory."

We believe it & then we don't, popping back into the wisdom of the world, which is about success, numbers, income, prizes. Our love of this wisdom is not just a problem for preachers. It is a problem for the whole church, which is always in danger of forgetting whose spokesperson it is.

We are the lovers of a God who specializes in turning the world's values upside down. We are the followers of a Lord who waited tables & washed feet. We are the heirs of a Spirit who has power to revive the whole creation, beginning with us, but only if we will allow it – by giving up all illusions that we know how to save ourselves & begging God, one more time, to show us how it is done.

One reason we run from God's wisdom, I think, is because we don't know how to behave once we have surrendered our power. Do we just go limp now? Probably not. We should probably go on trying to be the best we know how to be, using the best tools at hand. We

just shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that we know what is really going on.

It is entirely possible that some of our proudest achievements are embarrassing to God & some of our most dismal failures please God very much. There is simply no way of telling, since our wisdom is so different from God's wisdom. The only thing we can be sure of is that everything we offer up—ailing churches & prosperous ones, tongue-twirling preachers & those who struggle with every word – they are all eligible for the transforming power of God, who loves nothing better than bringing the dead back to life.

Meanwhile the medium is the message. When we are able to give ourselves to that message without embezzling God's glory, when we are able to tell the story without cluttering it up with our own craving for success, then it becomes clearer to everyone (and especially to us) that God is the only fit object of our hearts' desires. All else is dust.

As Jim read St Paul's words to us just a moment ago, saying, "When I came to you, brothers & sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ & him crucified."

Many who came to hear Paul were disappointed by him. His speech was contemptible. He stood there trembling, with his crooked legs bumping together & his bushy uni-brow leaking sweat, as if he were afraid a lion might jump on him at any moment & tear him apart.

And you know what? Thank goodness for that. Because of that, there could be no doubt whose power was holding him up there, loosening his tongue until the words came out & even after they came out, doing something through that short bald man that the words themselves could not explain.

It wasn't human wisdom on display that day, but the power of Almighty God, who is still eager to inhabit anyone who dares. Amen.