

5th Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 2.8.26

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

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

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 being destroyed. But we speak God's wisdom, a hidden mystery, which God decreed before the ages for our glory and which none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 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"—God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human 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. 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.

Matthew 5:13-20

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (494)

When Tobias was to start college at St. Olaf I discovered two acquaintances from high school who lived in the Twin Cities. One I'd known fairly well, a girl in my

graduating class, a four-year senior like me, a rower in my boat on the Exeter crew. The other I hadn't known well at all, only came to once we were both adults and on Facebook. As for whether they knew each other, I wasn't sure. But when the weekend came for incoming students to visit, and Tobias and I made the trip, I arranged to have dinner with both of them and their spouses.

Turns out, they did know each other—did even back in the day. In fact, in an offhand comment one made and the other picked up on, it was unearthed again that their fathers had known each other when, a generation earlier, they were both at Exeter. It seemed they'd once known this, had forgotten it, and now remembered again.

And it had a funny effect on me: it threw me back into that place of being a teenager at Exeter with all I didn't know. A first generation student, a day student, I was hardly starting from far behind. Some kids, when they arrived there, some *boys*, didn't have any clothes to meet the dress code (jacket and tie) and further didn't have any way to get those clothes. As for me, my life had been comfortable and very settled in New England, with a friendly New Hampshire neighborhood to play in, a bike, a dog, an older sister. My family skied in the winter, went to the nearby public beach in the summer. But I knew nearly nothing of prep school New England. I knew so little I didn't even know there were such things *to* know.

Quite the fool.

Paul says something to this effect about his time in Corinth. Writing to the Corinthians he describes his state of mind when he arrived among them, that he knew nothing among them except this one thing: Jesus and him crucified.

I imagine in Corinth there was a lot to know, a lot of social subtext: ins and outs, who's in and who's out. Corinth was founded as a city in 900 BCE. Halfway between Athens and Sparta, it was (and is) situated on an isthmus between the Peloponnese peninsula and mainland Greece. As such it was a center for trade and had, by 400 BCE, become one of the region's largest and most important cities with a population of 90,000. The Romans demolished it in 146 BCE but built a new city in its place a hundred years later and made it the capital city of the region, *Archaea*.

A hundred years later still, Paul would arrive in Corinth—and hardly a rube by this point. He'd traveled a lot by the time he reached Corinth, a city he came to on his second missionary journey. His first had brought him well into what's now south central Turkey, and his second, before ending in Corinth, had him traveling overland through Turkey and then Greece. By the time he'd arrived in this busy port city, where he would live for eighteen months, he'd already seen some things, had already *suffered* some things—shipwrecks, imprisonment, expulsion, even (maybe) a stoning.

Which made it so the risk of ignorance was a potentially costly one. When you arrive in a new place and don't know what there is to know, when you arrive there and actively *choose* not to know what there is to know, it can really cost you. I once met up with someone relatively new to Lenox, and she said she'd already managed to get to know almost everyone. I warned her: "You don't actually know everyone until you know how everyone knows everyone else." She made a lot of blunders as she tried to establish herself, while I sat on my hands: "That's just not how we *do it* here."

The thing is, the message Paul was in Corinth to impart was one that was very much to defy those social mores—or really any social mores. The message of Christ and him crucified is all about bringing the high and the low into communion, bringing the stuff of heaven, in all its ethereal loveliness, and the stuff of the earth, in all its gritty disappointment, onto the same plane, pulled up in chairs around the same table. So a certain blindness even to the fact of who's high and who's low, what's elite and what's basic and how all that is interpreted and navigated and made to fit around the new arrival just so: a certain ignorance to it all, though risky, can also be a surprising advantage. If what you have to impart is total equality in value and worthiness of every person, every creature, then it can be surprisingly helpful not to know who you're talking to beyond that they are a person, one of God's beloved creatures.

This isn't to say Paul couldn't keep up if it should come to that, couldn't manage to be wise to the ways of the world or even to the mysterious ways of God. No, for he says that among the mature he could speak with wisdom about this new revelation that upended the whole world. What's more, he would do this very thing, through the letters

he left behind, written to congregations he helped establish and kept by those congregations to be kept eventually through the process of canonization. He would prove that there was no end to what thought this new revelation could provoke.

Paul, as you might know, has suffered some reputational blows throughout the long history of the church. This is at no time more the case than in recent decades when he's been accused of being sexist, elitist, anti-Semitic. A closed-minded, rule-bound prig who subdued the livingness of Christ with the deadening thud of religion. Christ brought a spirit: Paul made a religion. That's what's said about him a lot, even in the classrooms of seminaries.

As for what I think, I admire Paul. I think he was an imaginative genius, able to wonder his way out from under his cultural canopy, the imaginative world that holds a people together in a particular place at a particular time.

Consider: a society is, among other things, a gathering of people who share an image of the world, a social imaginary, says Charles Taylor, a narrative that gives intelligibility to their social and historical context. As such, Paul was a Jew in the deeply Jewish land of 1st century Palestine.

But then, as a grown man, well into adulthood in all its fixity of thinking, following an encounter with the risen Christ, he wondered his way out from under that blessed canopy, one though under which life had for him, as for lots of people, been good and orderly and intelligible. Nevertheless, out from under this canopy of blessing he departed into a new world wherein the God of all time, the Creator of the universe, its Living Lord who would reign from pole to pole, from beginning to end and beyond, became flesh, came as a man amidst history, to live, to suffer, to be killed by the powers and principalities, and then to live again forever more.

None of which fit under the canopy in which Paul and all his people had long dwelt.

So now what?

I always find it awesome—truly awesome—when someone can undergo, so clearly yet also graciously undergo, a change of mind, which isn't to say merely a change of

opinion on this thing or that thing, a change in values when it comes to this social conundrum or that political problem, but an utter and thoroughgoing change of mind. Call it *metanoia*, as it would be called in biblical Greek. Call it repentance, as it would be translated into English, though inadequately so because we hear repentance as a suggestion of guilt and that we *should* change rather than that we might, by God's grace and to our great joy, change, to see the world as it truly is, in constitution and in value. Love!

The church book club, having just read Gary Wills' book *What Paul Meant* likely holds Paul in a similar light, appreciating that in lots of ways Paul was no fool except in this one important way: that he was a fool for Christ and him crucified, about whom the simplest of minds can feel assured in his gentleness, mercy, and love, while the wisest of minds can set forth in exploring the countless mysteries of the universe and of creaturely being that this new revelation make newly revealed. A girl with Down's Syndrome once declared to me how much she loves Jesus. Meanwhile, Charles Taylor, professor at McGill in political philosophy, wrote the eight-hundred-page masterpiece, *A Secular Age*, with starting and finishing points that were basically the same, that he loves Jesus. What a wonderful confession that would have such disparate people with such disparate capacities and projects in life feel so equally and joyfully at home. Paul opened up that world of foolish wisdom and wise folly for all of us to enter in.

And one of the assets for opening this world that Paul embraced in his mission work was a willful ignorance of the people to whom he would preach, the people among whom he would bring the good news of God-with-us.

Social guile is a tempting thing. It's good to know whom you're among, how to appeal to the different factions, what tripwires to avoid, what pots of wealth or other assets to tap into. Where are the possibilities? Where are the liabilities? Who will connect you to whom, and whom should you avoid?

Social guile is a tempting thing.

As it happens, Paul met one of his wealthiest benefactors in Corinth, Prisca and her husband Aquila—but there’s no indication that he set out to do so. He wasn’t seeking the wealthy, seeking the elite. He was seeking to bring good news to any and all—

which he apparently did in Corinth, good news to people of all types, gathering congregations filled with people of all types.

It didn’t always make for happy coexistence. No, indeed, it seems there was no more conflicted a place than Corinth in Paul’s legacy, there were no more conflicted congregations than the ones in Corinth. Indeed, Paul wrote likely four letters to those congregations over the years. Though we only have two in the Bible, there’s evidence of at least four, pieces of which seem to comprise 2nd Corinthians—all this writing because the churches were wracked with conflict, wracked with elitism. Following Paul’s time in Corinth, it seems some other apostles came along, so-called super apostles who, with all the charisma and rhetorical power that Paul apparently lacked, managed to woo people away from the simple gifts of the gospel—gather people in, read and interpret the word, share in a meal, and do works of charity and lovingkindness no matter who, no matter where.

It’s hard to upend this human habit of going after the most glittering thing, the most powerful and easily appealing thing. It’s hard to avoid the corrupting habit of angling after what might be in it for you.

We’re getting a good look into how the elite seem to seek one another out, wise to one another, even looking out for one another, getting each other’s kids into private schools and colleges, offering each other rides on private jets to private islands, while also holding each other hostage with kompromat, proof of ugly, even criminal, even violent behavior. The tranche of Epstein files that has glutted up the internet in the last several days opens a window into an otherwise dark world wherein if you know, you know, and if you don’t know then you’re basic, likely living one of those millions of lives so like all the others, lives of little more than quiet desperation. If you’re not in the Hamptons, you might as well be in hell. If you’re not on the Lolita Express then would you even bother with Delta or United?

It was actually called the Lolita Express.

What is wrong with us? How could anything so brilliantly have glittered that we were willing to look past a “Lolita Express”?

It’s not infrequent that the old embarrassment creeps in about how little I knew when I was young, my liking things that (turns out) were mediocre, my ignorance about who’s who and what’s what.

When I was a freshman, word went out about a fellow freshman’s apartment featured in that month’s *Architectural Digest*. I’d never heard of *Architectural Digest* so I went to the periodicals room in the library to look it up. And I saw the apartment. And it had a nice view, penthouse that it was, overlooking Lake Michigan. But where did she play when she was young? I mean, there was no back yard.

When I was a senior, this guy Moritmer asked me to prom. But I said no because he’d always been such a jerk to me. Why would I go to prom with him? Why would I go *anywhere* with him? As for the girl who eventually said yes, she showed up at prom with a new bracelet from Tiffany’s, which was a store that I think by that point I’d heard of. And the guy was Moritmer Sackler, whom I’m guessing most other people knew had an art museum at Harvard named after his family, and the Egyptian wing at the Met as well. He also, as it happens, is a member of the family that brought us the opioid crisis, the Sackler’s of Purdue Pharma, making him now one of the richest people in the world.

Bullet: dodged.

I can’t claim personal virtue in my early ignorance. But I can see grace in it—and I can, and do, admire Paul for his preference for such foolishness, foolishness as opened him to the wisdom of God.

I’ve said this before, but I’ll say it again: one of the more subversive things the church does on any given Sunday is to open its doors and welcome any in who would come in. There’s no entrance exam. There’s no ticket fee. For some historic churches the only quiz is about which door to use, for so infrequently does it seem old churches use their big main door. But even that’s not the case for Church on the Hill. No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here. It’s this spirit

that is saving the world. It's this practice that gets me, and maybe you as well, through all that we've got to get through.

Thanks be to God.