

One Thing Needful, 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5
Pastor Judy Bangsund
January 12, 2020

Dear Friends, I greet you in Jesus' name.

As I sat down last week to prepare this sermon, I picked up a book by Philip Yancey. The devotional for that day described the way an Amish community calls its pastors. As a member of the Call Team, I was immediately interested. It seems that in a community where few people have been educated past the 8th grade (and no one has had seminary training), they vote for any male member who shows pastoral potential. Those with at least 3 votes are then seated at a table, each with a randomly-chosen hymn book placed before him. One of those books has a card inside that designates that person as their new pastor. This new pastor has only one responsibility: to preach twice a week, each time for about 90 minutes. All the other pastoral duties are shared by the congregation.

Surprised, Yancey asked his Amish friend, "But... what if the new pastor doesn't feel qualified to preach?" His friend was puzzled. "Well, if he did feel qualified, we wouldn't want him. We want someone who is humble, who depends on God."

While I must admit this system has its upsides, I'm not ready to advocate it for St Timothy's. But one benefit does stand out to me: the core importance of depending on God, and the absolute centrality of the preaching of God's Word for the life of the congregation. We need to pay attention to core truths in the Christian life.

Today we begin a sermon series on 1 Corinthians, one of the two most important letters written by the Apostle Paul (the other being the letter to the Romans). We encourage everyone to read this letter through, over the next seven weeks. There will be a Middle Hour class, led by Pastor Jim, that studies it chapter by chapter. Grow Groups will follow the sermons and their content. Clearly, we feel there is more here than we can possibly address from the pulpit alone, and that this letter has value to us, as a congregation, as well as to each believer.

As we set the stage for the series this morning, it is helpful to know who the Corinthians were, because (as we know) location affects culture. Situated on a skinny neck of land between 2 seaports, it was a thriving commercial center, five times the size of Athens. Ships could be wheeled over the 4 miles between seaports, thus ensuring a vibrant trade. Sailors abounded, along with a rich diversity of immigrants, all seeking a better life where jobs were plentiful. Shrines to Caesar and his family, along with temples to Greek gods populated the town, which led a confusion of religious beliefs and practices. Corinth was ripe for the Gospel, the message of the cross.

And how does this letter begin? With Paul's absolute dependence on knowing Christ, and him crucified. How does it end? With a resounding chapter on the resurrection of Jesus. Friends, in the bustling and confusing place in which we live, you and I need to be reminded again and again, of the *one thing most needful*: faith in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

We do tend to get distracted. So many things grab our attention: family and work, school and friends -- you fill in the details. (Need I remind anyone that tax season is upon us?) Life is busy.

We get distracted, and often by good and necessary things. Living in Silicon Valley in the 21st century, we are similar in many ways, to those living in Corinth in the first century. Paul is writing to a lively and gifted, but distracted and sometimes wayward congregation. You might say that this congregation was in its adolescence, full of potential, rather impressed with its own giftedness, and pretty sure they knew better than anyone else how to live. (I remember at age 18 telling my mom, who wanted me to get to know “that nice Jim Bangsund,” to let me run my own life.) This rather immature outlook led to some problems with misplaced loyalties and divisions, questions about freedom and boundaries, spiritual gifts, marriage and the like. Because Paul was their spiritual father, he found himself parenting them by letter. Communicating from a distance, his tone sometimes became harsh. Paul lacked the advantage of personal presence, and the opportunities that a face-to-face conversation might bring. But still, that conversation needed to happen – and like the Corinthians, we need to hear it too, lest our distractions interfere with our core calling: to follow a man who was crucified on a cross.

When you stop to think of it, isn't that a strange focal point? I mean, how do you explain that to your neighbor? It seems rather odd – foolish really – to follow a man who was crucified as a criminal. Such a death – particularly of an innocent man – seems a sign of weakness. But Paul says that the message of the cross is both our wisdom and power. *Really, Paul? The cross is our wisdom?* Yes! Christians, the way we understand our world, and the way we decide what is important and how we should behave, has its source in the cross. This *is* our wisdom. Now obviously, we are not throwing out common sense, science, history or other sources of information. But God has a different way of thinking. God says, through the prophet Isaiah, that his ways are not our ways; his thoughts are not our thoughts. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so are his thoughts and ways higher than, and superior to ours. At times, God uses foolish, even shameful things – like a cross – to replace more acceptable forms of wisdom.

The cross, Paul writes, is foolishness to those outside the faith. It makes no sense to those folks that God would reconcile the world to himself through a criminal's death on the cross. No way. To the Jews, the cross was a curse. In Galatians, Paul quotes the Old Testament, saying that anyone who is nailed to a tree is under a curse. So, to a Jew, it was obvious that the cross couldn't be God's method of choice to save the world. But God chose this very instrument of death – cruel and shameful as it was – to demonstrate his wisdom. We live in a broken and cruel world. God used the tools of this world – the very worst – and flipped them; using them to bring about the greatest possible good: the salvation of all humankind. This is the *wisdom* of God – so different from what we would think – victory over sin and death through the unlikely means of the cross.

Backing up his claim that preaching should rest, not on man's wisdom, but on God's, Paul says, “When I came to you, I resolved to know nothing among you except Christ crucified.” Paul also relates that he had approached them with “fear and trembling.” Now, this does not sound like Paul! What is behind all this??

If you turn to Acts chapters 17-18, we find that on his way to Corinth, Paul stopped in the city of Athens, and saw how Athenians were always talking about the newest thing. So he spoke to the people about Jesus' resurrection. It was a great sermon, filled with quotes from Greek philosophy and poetry, appealing to the order of creation and arguing with unassailable logic. It

was a very culturally relevant, well-crafted sermon. And what was the result? Not much, really: some people sneered, others wanted to know more. A few became believers.

But, my friends, you and I know that there are no references today to the “church at Athens.” There is no biblical letter to the Athenians. And, according to Acts 18, Paul went directly from Athens to Corinth. Reflecting on that visit, Paul writes:

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power....

Did Paul have his tail between his legs, feeling like a failure, even after delivering the “perfect” sermon?

Paul had learned a lesson from that experience: that the power of God does not rest on human wisdom. In fact, God’s thoughts *are* different from ours; and God’s power can pack a punch in ways we do not expect. Think of it. Generally, when we consider God’s power, we think in terms of miracles. Healing from incurable diseases. Protection from unpreventable accidents. Unexpected provision of a needed job or home. God’s power – we think – has to do with fixing our problems in this life.

Now, don’t get me wrong. God does indeed act in miraculous ways at times, and I often pray for his intervention, grateful for his compassion. But the cross tells us of a greater kind of power: the power of salvation from sin and death. The power of forgiveness – and peace. The power to transform lives, from the inside out. This, my friends, is real power! No one but God can change hearts. People throughout centuries have testified to this power. It’s the power that gives inner freedom to prisoners; the power that frees addicts, prostitutes and the oppressed from slavery; the power that transforms an angry, arrogant person to one who is full of humble joy and gratitude. And the power to change that which kills to that what gives life is what the cross of Christ is all about. There is one thing needful, my friends: and that is Christ, and him crucified.

So: what are you hearing from God’s Word, as you listen today? For we, in the Silicon Valley, are not so different from the Athenians. Aren’t we always looking for something new? New entertainment, new cuisine, new startups, new technology? Isn’t this what captures our interest? And aren’t we pretty similar to the Corinthians? Gifted, but easily distracted, confused by a diversity of beliefs and opinions, sometimes rebellious against God? So let me ask you some questions I want you to ponder this week. What determines your priorities, your activities when you wake up in the morning? What shapes your behavior, your values? On what power do you depend to be successful – and how do you define success?

My friends, let’s learn from Paul on this. Better yet, let’s learn from Jesus. When Mary and Martha were hosting Jesus in their home, Martha was busy with the tasks expected of a hostess. But Mary sat at the foot of Jesus, listening to him. *One thing is needful*, Jesus said. Focus on him; who he is; what he taught. And most of all, what he has done for you on the cross. *This* is what shapes your life. *This* is the core of the Gospel, the message you share with others. *This* is what motivates you to service and to witness.

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I leave you with two images (Confimands, I hope you are still listening). The first is your baptism, when the pastor takes water to trace the shape of the cross on your forehead, speaking your name and saying, “You ... are marked with the cross of Christ forever.” And the second image is Ash Wednesday, when we use ash instead of water, making that cross visible, recalling Jesus’ death. I have to tell you, as a pastor, that one of my favorite sights is that sea of faces, all looking up at us, almost oblivious to that messy but beautiful sign of the cross. What does it mean to you, that you are marked ... with the cross of Christ?

One thing is needful. Let’s pray.