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Learning from Long Ago: The Corinthian Christians and Us

4. “Not the Spirit of the World...”

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.

It always slightly amuses me when Paul claims to be speaking simply, or when he downplays the complexity of his thought and his writing. We see it in this morning's scripture – the latest in our series on what the Corinthian church might have to teach us – when Paul says he didn't come with fancy “words of wisdom,” or, as The Message translates it, with any “fancy footwork.” A couple of weeks ago, Paul claimed that he came to the Corinthians with no “fancy rhetoric.” Yet anyone who has read much at all of Paul's writing knows that he is a very deep thinker, but also one whose thinking gets conveyed in sometimes extremely complex sentences at which either your eyes glaze over or you have to read again and again to begin to understand them. Now, sometimes Paul escapes from his syntactical complexity with some of the most marvelous lines in the Bible – such as when he so powerfully reminds us that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, or when he sums up the gospel in

Romans 8 reminding us that there is nothing in all creation, not even death, that will ever separate us from God. But other times his writing reminds me of what Mark Twain once said about the German language: “Whenever... [a] German [writer] dives into a sentence, that is the last you are going to see of him till he emerges on the other side of his Atlantic with his verb in his mouth.”¹

Today’s scripture is one of those complex ones that you have to slow down and read and re-read. Yet when we do so, when we think and pray over it, when we remember what we have learned about the Corinthian church and when we recall what Chris Dorsey said last week in his marvelous sermon about Paul’s proclamation of the “foolishness” of the gospel, we can begin to see that Paul’s point here is actually simple and compelling and convicting, even if it is wrapped in verbiage that may seem impenetrable. To understand Paul’s point, though, let’s recap what we know of the church at Corinth and their situation. Corinth was a thriving seaport city, a blue-collar city, that was ethnically and racially and economically and religiously diverse. The congregation had been founded by Paul, and was always one of his favorites, but was also the one that gave him the most grief. Members of the church wrote him at least six letters, and while we don’t have those, we do have Paul’s responses that over time got collated into what we now call First and Second Corinthians. In its early days, the church struggled over its interpretation of the faith and who was to be the most influential – Paul or Apollos or Peter. They were a fractious bunch, fighting over the meaning of Jesus, over how they should celebrate the Lord’s Supper, over what was the most important Christian virtue, whether their faith was primarily a matter of believing the “right” things or doing the “right” things.

As Paul opens his responses to them, he reminds them that God had made them one family with all their glorious and sometimes exasperating differences, and, as

¹<http://www.kombu.de/twain-3.htm>

Chris so eloquently pointed out last week, he commanded them to embrace the fact that what he called the “foolishness” of the Cross meant that whatever their disagreements, they were to find their unity in their compassion for those whom Jesus called “the least of these.” If we use language from our congregation’s denominational heritage, he reminded them that while they were free to contend with each other over “non-essentials,” it was nonetheless crucial that they have no disagreement over the essentials of the faith: that God values everyone equally, that class and race should never make anyone “second-class” in the church, that God’s love is for each and all and God’s justice for each and all. Not to embrace these “essentials” would turn the church into a club rather than a mission station to a needy world.

And now today, Paul continues his response to them and it is indeed complex but I believe that it really boils down to one thing: Paul counsels them that they are to always seek to know and be inspired by the Spirit of God, not the spirit of the world. What does that mean? After all, we sometimes hear the word “spirit” and we really don’t know what it’s referring to. It can be a vapid and vacuous and religious-sounding term without much meaning attached to it. It can be, as someone once said, a “spa word” that we can soak in and be warmed by without it actually having much content. So, if we are going to ask what Paul means by the Corinthian Church – or us – being guided by the Spirit of God and not the spirit of the world, we need to understand something of what Paul might be alluding to. After all, he didn’t invent or pick that phrase out of the blue. No, as a learned and devout Jew, Paul knew that the phrase “the Spirit of God” is one that deeply informs the Jewish faith and permeates the Hebrew scriptures. So what does the Jewish understanding of “the Spirit of God” mean, an understanding that is one of the foundations of the Christian faith as we have been made, through Christ, “honorary Jews,” as one writer has put it?

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, the notion of the Spirit of God

is associated with three things: First, the Spirit of God is that which brings order to chaos. The opening lines of the book of Genesis, the creation story, is God bringing structure and form to the formless. Sometimes the Spirit's order comes, too, as comfort: into the burdens of our grief, our pain, our hurts, God seeks to bring healing - a kind of order – and hope even in the midst of awfulness. Into those times in our lives when, in Bob Dylan's wonderful phrase, our "existence [is] led by confusion boats, mutiny from stern to bow," God is there in every moment luring us towards form and structure and an order that will make possible good.

Second, the Spirit of god is that which sometimes, on the contrary, brings chaos to order. You see, injustice is often extremely orderly. Persecution and oppression are only possible when there is a system that supports it. Mussolini in World War II Italy "made the trains run on time" and many have noted how Hitler's transportation system that took Jews and gypsies and gays to the death camps a prime example of how to run a railroad with efficiency and orderliness, along with, as one author puts it, "efficient and economic methods of mass sterilization."² Apartheid in South Africa was a very orderly system, with its rigid racial classifications and legal strictures. And even apart from the orderliness of injustice, God sometimes moves to break up the orderliness of our lives when we have become too complacent, too comfortable, too smug, too set in our ways to consider that God might be wanting to use our lives even nobler things.

Third, the Spirit of God through the Bible is identified with wisdom, and that wisdom is very often personified in the scriptures as female, and that figure embodies a crucial trait: truth. The wisdom literature and references in the Old Testament presume, in the words of one writer, that "God has imbedded truth in all of creation" and our "responsibility to God involves finding [that] truth."³ And in much of the writings of the

²<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007387>

³<http://www.crivoice.org/wisdom.html>

Old Testament the Spirit of God as the figure of wisdom addresses individuals personally with the responsibility to choose the right path, to choose truth over falsehood, because in doing so we express, in a phrase found many times, our “fear of the Lord.”⁴ Now, before we move on, we need to note that that word “fear” here is actually, given how language has changed, much better understood as “reverence.” So, the third trait of God’s Spirit is manifested as truth-seeking wisdom which reverences God’s truth.

So, Paul’s counsel that both the Corinthians and we are to seek after the Spirit of God means that we are to value orderliness and form over chaos, that we are to pursue justice when orderliness has turned to oppressiveness, and that we are to reverence our God by always seeking after and abiding in truth. Paul contrasts these things with the “spirit of the world,” and it is therefore easy to begin to see why Paul kept criticizing the Corinthians: their ordinary order for fellowship meals and the Lord’s Supper hurt the poor among them, but their disorderly fractiousness and fighting over which leader was “the best” hurt the unity of their witness to a needy world. And then there is truth: For Paul, the truth is that Christ crucified is the gospel’s testimony to a God who loves this whole world, who expects justice for this whole world, who is passionate, persistent love rather than the easy violence that too often marks the world. Such is the truth of the Spirit of God that Paul wants the Corinthians to recall and to live by – and not by the “spirit of the world” which tells the poor that they deserve what they get, which too often takes away the things that give both comfort and hope to those who are hurting, which divides the world into factions and winners and losers and says you should do whatever you need to do, no matter whom it hurts, to be among the winners. That is the so-called truth of the “spirit of the world” and Paul rails against it because it is so very at odds with the truth called for by the Spirit of God!

⁴Cf. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/wisdom/>

My friends, Paul is also speaking to us. For in our day and our time truth is an endangered species. When Jesus left this earth, he told His disciples that he was giving them the Holy Spirit to guide them and he explicitly called the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of Truth” (John 15:26). Earlier this week, a minister by the name of David Watson wrote these powerful and provocative words; listen to what he says:

As Christians, we seek truth because we believe that truth is inherently good. All truth is ultimately the product of God’s creative divine Word, who was made flesh in Jesus Christ. Whether we are talking about the crowd size at the presidential inauguration, a mathematical equation, the inherent value of human lives, or the saving work of Jesus Christ, truth matters. Truth matters. Once we lose sight of this idea, we are not simply lost, but much worse: we’ve given up hope of finding our way.⁵

Yet, as another writer put it this week, “Jesus expected his followers to be incarnated lamps, to be God’s light in the dark corners of the world guiding people to the Truth.”⁶

Here’s the problem, though: Whatever our political proclivities, we are more and more only listening to those folks we already agree with and we are more and more susceptible to falling for so-called truths that are not truth at all. A recent study by the National Academy of Sciences has shown that “Social media actually isolates us, creating... echo chambers where old -- and sometimes erroneous -- information is just regurgitated over and over again.” “In other words,” the story about this study says, you and all of your friends are all sharing the same stuff, even if it's bunk, because you think alike and your tightly-defined exchange of ideas doesn't allow for anything new or challenging to flow in.... This means misinformation -- which

⁵<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/7965/alternative-facts-and-christian-truth>

⁶<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/7956/following-jesus-and-supporting-donald-trump-are-utterly-irreconcilable>

is a much more appropriate term for “fake news” -- can rattle around unchecked.... This can lead to reckless sharing -- we sometimes share something without really examining what it is.⁷

A bleak picture, isn't it? We more and more isolate ourselves in our silos, listening only to the folks we already agree with, sharing information that is often not information at all but more and more over-simplified and even falsified, which makes our civic and religious life more and more fractured and uncivil – all of which leaves us more and more unable to truly contend over ideas because we cannot recognize truth and somehow have even come to belief that truth is whatever we might want it to be.

What can you and I do about this state of affairs? Well, if on the left, you only get your news from The DailyKos, or AddictingInfo, or RawStory, or if you're on the right and the only “truth” you'll believe is the things you hear on Fox News or The Drudge Report then stop. All over the internet there are helpful, non-partisan guides to which news stories are more balanced and which ones really play fast and loose with the truth. Seek those out. Examine things for yourselves and think for yourselves. Tune in from time to time to a source you don't ordinarily follow. Realize that your friends who so gleefully and smugly and prodigiously spread stories with the most sensationalized and over-simplistic “truth” may just be wrong.

The stakes, my friends, are too high not to do these things. The stakes are too high to fall for the things which so insidiously represent what Paul calls “the spirit of the world,” not the Spirit of God. For, as one writer, whom I want to close with, so very eloquently puts it:

We must be light incarnated in the darkness, shining the way towards the Truth in a world of fear and alternative facts. We must be a beacon of hope and a port of rescue in a sea of oppression. We must double down on our commitment to

⁷<http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/22/health/facebook-study-narrow-minded-trnd/index.html>

following Christ by seeking justice, defending the orphan, and caring for the least of these as their enemies work to ensnare them on all sides.⁸

Such indeed, is the Spirit of God, the Spirit that Paul counseled the Corinthians to seek and now implores us to seek as well. For “we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God....” May we indeed seek, and, with God’s help, may we indeed find. Amen.

⁸<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/7956/following-jesus-and-supporting-donald-trump-are-utterly-irreconcilable>