

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴

My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

⁶ 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 doomed to perish. ⁷ But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ 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” —

¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

¹¹ For 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.

¹² 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.

MESSAGE

Is anybody here good at keeping secrets? Really good?

I find I'm pretty good at it – my job requires me to be. As a minister I'm often invited into very personal and vulnerable parts of people's lives, and I have to respect their privacy. There are some secrets that I will never speak of – I'll take them to my grave.

There are other secrets that are hidden, but only hidden so that they may be revealed at the right time. The Wesseling anniversary is one of those. Cindy and I were emailing back and forth for several weeks as she was planning; after service we will all share the cake she brought in for today as a slide show plays on the screen in the library. Some secrets we hide specifically to make their revelation that much more exciting and dramatic.

Sometimes secrets are kept simply because we are not ready for the truth. As parents we walk this line all the time; there are things that we don't discuss while the children are around, or we speak in code. As our kids mature we will start to include them in conversations about money, sex, politics, Santa, and other 'grown up' talk; these 'secrets' come to light when we feel that our kids are able to handle them.

There's an interesting relationship between secrets and maturity; when we see certain signs of maturity in our kids we let them come in the inner circle, which then makes them feel more grown up and included, and this starts a cycle – greater maturity leads to greater access to knowledge; greater knowledge leads to greater maturity, and so on.

This can get out of control, and in fact it does all the time. We start off with very little wisdom or knowledge, and we're part of a very small circle. As we age and start becoming privy to some of that secret knowledge our circle grows until we become full members of the adult world; we are included, we've finally arrived.

However, once we're in that big club we realize that it really is a big club. We're one of seven billion members – once we're in the big circle we don't feel as special as we thought we would. So after widening our circle we want to narrow it some, we want to kick some people out of our circle of knowledge and create an inner circle for exceptional people. For people like us.

To do that we need more secrets. We need some arcane knowledge that is only for the elites, something that the commoners aren't privy to. So we create secret societies – little enclaves of power and influence embedded within the larger culture. These little clubs usually have their own jargon or language, rituals and rites, a social order, and above all else, some form of secret knowledge that they guard.

Don't think that I'm only speaking of grand conspiracies here like the Illuminati or the Templars – you will find these inner circles everywhere, and you likely belong to at least one yourself. Service clubs, trade associations, art studios, karate clubs, legions, political parties, activist groups, alumni associations. All of them have a jargon of their own, rites and rituals, social order, and some form of knowledge that is unique to their particular group.

Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't group ourselves based on common interest. Certainly there are things that I'm only able to speak about with other ministers - they face similar challenges and have had similar experiences. Likewise among you there are police who share with other police, teachers who associate with other teachers, artists who connect with artists.

The association itself is not bad, in fact associations like this are usually helpful. The trouble comes when the association gets infected with pride and elitism. When we start looking down our nose at others, thinking 'those pitiful peons – too ignorant to even know how ignorant they are.'

At that point our secret or not-so-secret associations cease being constructive and start becoming destructive. We start demonizing and dehumanizing the people who aren't in our particular circle. Just look at what has happened to political discourse over the past decade, especially below the 49th.

Each side is absolutely convinced that their view – their secret knowledge – is the only truth. Anyone who disagrees is either incredibly dense, or hateful and evil. It's easy to point fingers at the American political scene – it's an easy target. It's rather more uncomfortable to admit that this behaviour is also evident within the Presbyterian church as we discuss issues of same-sex marriages.

When the inner circles that we create become too convinced of their own inerrancy, to full of their own wisdom and knowledge, we become a fractious and unruly society. We lose sight of our commonality and instead focus on what divides us.

This is exactly what was going on in Corinth when Paul penned his letter to them. The church had become divided due to elitism.

Paul was the one who started the Corinthian church, beginning with Aquila and Priscilla, Stephanus, Crispus, Gaius and others. After establishing the church Paul moved on to other apostolic work, and in his absence Apollos came to town and began to preach.

Apollos is described in the book of Acts as an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He was educated and refined – cultured and classy.

Within the church a small group formed around Apollos – those who also considered themselves to be educated and refined – cultured and classy. They created their own inner circle with their own jargon, rites and rituals, social order, and special knowledge.

In time this led to discord and division, with some people claiming to follow Paul, others identified with Apollos, and still others claimed Cephas as their leader.

Paul, of course, was quite disturbed by this development and wrote to them asking ‘were any of you baptized in my name? Was I the one hung on the cross? No? Then stop claiming allegiance to me. If you want to brag about who you represent, brag about representing the Lord.’

He then went on to write that they should all just stop being enamoured by their own philosophies and understandings and instead seek out the wisdom of God, wisdom that has lain secret and hidden from the very beginning of the age.

This is not some abstract wisdom that Paul was writing about. It isn’t secret knowledge passed down to those who know the right handshake or keyword. That’s because the wisdom that Paul was writing about is not an accumulated body of knowledge – it is a who. God’s wisdom has a name, and that name is Jesus.

This is why Paul wrote that he wasn’t concerned with lofty words of wisdom, rhetorical flourishes, or slick presentations. ‘I decided,’ he wrote, ‘to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ, and him crucified.’ It’s not that he didn’t have any other wisdom to offer – he was saying that the only important thing to know is that Jesus is the son of God, that he was crucified, and that God raised him. That’s it. The rest is sophistry.

That still holds true today. The crux of our faith is the cross. The cross is the centre-point of the universe. It is the point at which suffering meets salvation, depravity meets divinity, sin meets forgiveness.

Over the centuries there have been many attempts to explain the workings of the cross.

The moral influence theory tells us that Jesus was a teacher and example to follow, his sacrificial attitude should serve to inspire us to similar behaviour.

The ransom theory suggests that Christ died to pay for us – because of our sin a debt was owed, either to God or to Satan, and Jesus' death satisfied that debt. Anselm thought that Jesus' death restored God's honour lost by our sin.

The Christus Victor theory claims that Jesus' death defeated the powers of sin and evil; Substitution proposes that Jesus took the punishment that should have come to us.

The theory that resonates with me is the scapegoat theory – that Jesus' willing death at our hands demonstrates both the futility of retributive violence and the depth of God's love.

But – Paul's main point here is that it doesn't really matter how we try to explain it. We can use lofty language and wondrous words, and we can pretend that we alone have access to the secret knowledge of salvation while everyone else is scrabbling in the dirt. But if we do that it simply reveals that we haven't yet grasped the truth.

The only truth we need to know, according to Paul, is Jesus; and what we need to know about him is that he willingly went to the cross.

However we choose to explain it – that he was setting an example of selflessness, paying our debts, defeating sin and evil, or showing us just how far God is willing to go to show us that despite anything we do he will not turn his back on us – our explanation is not important.

What is important is that Jesus died for us, freeing us from our past, releasing us from our guilt, and enabling us to begin living as loving, welcoming, encouraging, supportive people, unencumbered by past failures. The cross shows us that who we were in the past does not have to determine who we will be in the future.

According to Paul, this is all we need to know. As we grow in Christ we can start to talk about how God is working, but all conversations need to begin with one simple thing; Jesus was the son of God, Jesus died for us, and now Jesus lives for us.

Scriptures tell us this. The Spirit within confirms it.

And now our task is to live this truth out. We do so not by using knowledge to divide us, to create hierarchies of belonging, but instead by sharing that one key piece of wisdom – the name of Jesus. Christ Jesus who willingly died for you, Christ Jesus who lives for you and is calling you to live for and with him.