

Sermon for Trinity Church

Epiphany 5, 2020

"When I came to you, brothers and 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, and him crucified."

Nearly sixty years ago, I was in Sunday school, enjoying the two men teaching our seventh-grade class. I can vividly remember one morning in particular despite the passing years. The morning began with one of the teachers waiting for us as we all arrived. The teacher told us what we were doing that morning, that he was going to bring a Martian into the classroom. After we stopped laughing, the teacher said that we, the class, were being called on to talk about Jesus with the Martian. The teacher left the class and returned with the "Martian," the other teacher who had a decorated grocery bag pulled over his head where we could only see his eyes. Yes, we knew who it was, but for the next hour, that "Martian" put on the most convincing act. How do you explain Jesus to someone who has no history or context? How do you explain the teaching of Jesus, the work of Jesus, even and especially the Jesus of the cross to someone (a Martian in this case) who has neither heard of Jesus nor more fundamentally, shares our culture?

Many years later, I realize that I learned two things that day that have been remarkably important to me. First, I learned that words are not enough; you can talk and talk, argue and persuade, piling up words on words and yet a splinter of cultural difference can make the whole pile of words collapse. My child self tried, believe me I tried. My mother used to tell me in her fine Appalachian lilt that I "could talk a raccoon out of a tree." But on that Sunday morning, I couldn't persuade a Martian to follow Jesus.

The second thing I learned was planted in me that morning but only grew over time—in fact it's still developing. I learned that we live inside of a culture, not outside of it. In other words, we know what we know and how to use what we know, but we don't know anything else. Let me explain: what we don't often realize, until we encounter someone like the Martian, is that we assume that everyone else knows and thinks the same things in the same way we do. If you think it's difficult to influence a Martian, just try swaying say as Sufi or a Sikh or a rock-ribbed Baptist, or for that matter, an agnostic. It's like trying to change the mind of a Minnesotan! (And I am one!)

Here's the point; you cannot persuade people to change what matters most to them, especially when you yourself may not realize what really matters most to you. A few years ago, a writer told the story of a mature fish passing a school of

minnows. The fish called to the minnows, "Enjoy the water, boys!" And the minnows, who lived enveloped in water, had no idea what the fish meant.

Doesn't that sound complicated? Those are the very same issues that Paul confronts this morning when he addresses the Corinthian church in his letter. How does Paul cross the cultural divide between the Corinthian church and him? Paul's a Jew, a well-educated Jew, but a Jew, nevertheless. As best we know, the Corinthians were Greek and Latin, many of them descendants of Roman soldiers who were sent to reestablish the city decades earlier. What culture do Paul and the Corinthians have in common? Precious little.

Bearing that in mind, we can grasp the thorn of Paul's problem. Paul wrote telling the Corinthians how he felt when he arrived. He felt inadequate, perplexed and confused. In fact, Paul confesses that he really didn't know what he was going to say! Even though we know Paul had an excellent mind and training in rhetoric, where should he start? How was Paul going to share the message of hope with the Corinthian "Martians?"

Paul, inspired by the Spirit, went with the fundamental of his faith, that Jesus came into the world for us out of God's love, a love immeasurable by human standards. The people of Corinth lived in a city that lay at the crossroads of an Empire. As such, it was no doubt cosmopolitan and curious, filled with interest in the unique and the unexpected. I like to think of Bend as a metaphor for Corinth—we too are a city filled with people of diverse origins and background, fiercely interested in the latest and greatest. Now, what Paul had to offer was surely unexpected. In fact, Paul's message was so entirely unexpected that the message must have felt as if it indeed came from another planet. Paul's message went much further even than the curious Corinthians could have expected. Paul's message was contrary to everything they had seen and heard. The message was simple if inconceivable--God become human, suffered anguish for them and that despite being both God and human, died on the cross in order to defeat death.

Just a little earlier in the letter, Paul had admitted that the message he was offering had to be a stumbling block and foolishness for the spiritually sophisticate and the intellectual. The reality, Paul admitted, was that God chose the unexpected, the lowborn, those lacking influence, the poor and the downtrodden, with whom to share God's message. As any well-trained leader or speaker in Paul's own time knew, if you really wanted to shape the course of culture and politics, you should start with the influential and powerful and wealthy. That's how the sophisticated would proceed. But strangely, not God. Paul had come to know very well that the God of this world was an advocate for the improbable, the poor and the downtrodden. This was the same God who had centuries earlier led a

tiny band of anonymous desert people to freedom, not just for their benefit but surprisingly, even astonishingly, for the benefit of the entire world. This God that Paul proclaimed means to show humanity that God cares for them and God's creation most of all.

Paul continues his letter by offering that the wisdom of this age, even if it comes from rulers and intellectuals, must finally collapse under its own weight. How does Paul know that? Because all of the sophisticated and influential die, and with them, their wisdom. That word, "wisdom," means a great deal to Paul. When Paul speaks of wisdom, he doesn't just mean the insight granted to people seventy and older. When Paul speaks of wisdom, he's talking about the means by which we understand how the world works and its purpose. And here's wisdom as Paul knows it—God has deliberately chosen the poor and excluded just so God could show the world how God loves. More than that, God has gone one step further. As Paul writes in Philippians, this God has emptied God of every power and entitlement in order to meet humanity on its own terms. God, in a way that's ridiculously foolish by the standards of our world, according to our wisdom, works from the bottom up. In fact, and perhaps this is the most powerful message a Martian, or anyone else could hear: God doesn't seek to reason or argue or compel people against their will to believe in God's love and hope. Instead, this God, this upside down, inside out God, expresses God's love with God's own life. Don't listen to what I say, God seems to say, look at what I do. The love of God is beyond the reach of the rational and influential, out of bounds and beyond our expectations, and yet there it is, God lives out that love right in front of us. Amen.

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