

Deciding to Know One Thing

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 (1:18-25)

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“Whad’Ya Know?” That’s the name of a quiz show on NPR. Or maybe you like the other one: “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me.” What *do* you know? Are you smarter than a fifth grader? What is it that you really know?

If there is one thing that you have learned that you would want to pass on to your children or to your best friend, what would it be? The missionary Paul is very clear about what that one thing is for him. When he traveled to Corinth, a cosmopolitan trade center in first-century Greece, he could have carried with him the culture of his homeland, as many later missionaries did. He could have focused on teaching the people basic Hebrew values, or focused on their sexual lifestyles, or on the meaning of love—and in his letter he touches on all those things. But Paul made up his mind when he began preaching in Corinth that he was not going to be sidetracked by other issues. He made up his mind, he says, to know one thing: Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

There was a Scottish doctor in the 19th century, Sir James Simpson, who was famous for discovering chloroform. He was a courageous scientist who experimented on himself to try to find a chemical that would render patients unconscious during surgery without jeopardizing their recovery. Eventually he lost his life in one of his experiments. But shortly before his death, Sir James, knighted by Queen Victoria and considered by many to be the greatest physician of his time, was asked what he thought his greatest discovery had been. Without a moment’s hesitation he answered, “My greatest discovery in this life has been that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.”

The apostle Paul says that his one great discovery—or, he might say, the great one who found him—is Jesus, the Messiah, who was crucified. I know, he says, that many people find that foolish or even scandalous. The Jews don’t see how a man executed in weakness could be God’s anointed king; in fact, they see the cross as a sign that Jesus died under God’s curse. The Greeks for their part are looking for God in philosophy and expect to find God through human wisdom and investigation of the world. They find it absurd that the place to look for God is in the death of an accused terrorist in a backward corner of the Roman Empire.

William Willimon, longtime chaplain at Duke and now a Methodist bishop, said, “One of the dangers of being in church as often as I am is that it all starts to make sense.” We talk about the cross as if it were normal to gather around a means of execution and sing songs about it. We take it for granted that the Creator of the universe became a human and shared our weakness and even died—while the universe went on. We eat bread and drink wine or juice and say that this represents something wonderful that happened when the founder of our religion was killed. We forget that to any sane person this all sounds crazy.

Paul has not yet forgotten. He knows that he is being a fool for Christ. He knows that to those who think themselves wise he is an idiot—just as we have been reminded in our Wednesday class that Freud taught a whole generation to think that we are deluded by wishful thinking, just as we heard Stephen Hawking say this week that he has concluded that the universe created itself because of the law of gravity. A clear majority of the world thinks that we are wrong about the cross, even after 2000 years of history of changed lives. Muslims think that

Jesus could not possibly have died on the cross; God would not have allowed that. Most people think that Jesus was not God in the flesh—and if they thought about it they would probably agree that God in the flesh could not die without something terrible happening instead of something wonderful.

Paul is aware of the absurdity of what he teaches. The cross had not yet become a decoration to be worn as jewelry. It was a Roman instrument of death, a means of death intended to shame the perpetrator by hanging him naked in public until he died of suffocation, dehydration, or loss of blood. It was used for people we would call terrorists, or pirates, or leaders of slave rebellions. The cross was a lousy marketing tool in the first century, as it still is. The cross did not grab Paul's listeners and make them want to be part of a movement that led to execution. It didn't even make sense to most of them. And yet, Paul says, this is the heart of my message.

Paul was not trying to tell people how human beings can come to know God, the quest of the spiritual then and now. Paul was saying, instead, that God has thwarted every human attempt to find God. God has taken the initiative to save us on the cross in a way that defies every human definition of wisdom and power. You cannot find me by being wise. You cannot find me if you are looking for me in displays of power. I have already shown myself to you, and it was in the last place you would ever have looked: in the death of a young Palestinian on a Roman cross.

Early in this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is looking back on the beginnings of his ministry. I didn't come with eloquent rhetoric. In fact, I was pretty weak and I was scared to death. But you know what, I don't think it was a *bad* thing that my preaching was so lame. In fact, it was a *good* thing, because I was preaching the good news of God's weakness which had the power to save us. If you talk about the cross and sound like a Princeton academic, what people take away is that you can understand God by the force of intellect. If you talk about the cross and sound like a CEO, what people take away is that the gospel is about gaining control. If you talk about the cross and sound like a football coach, people assume that the Christian message is about winning. So, Paul says, if I sounded like a loser, so much the better. That way, when you finally did come to believe in Jesus you knew it wasn't because of Paul but because of God's Spirit.

If it's true that God has made himself known in Jesus and acted to transform us by Jesus' execution, where does that leave the wise people of the culture? We can ask that question just as Paul did. The philosophers of Paul's time were largely Stoics. They taught inner strength and courage and peace of mind that would help you get through the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and not give in. Be tough. Be a winner. Never give up. These are the values of empire, soldier's values, whether they come from Marcus Aurelius or Winston Churchill or Dr. Phil. It's all about attitude. It's about being a strong person through a spiritual quest.

There is some value to personal toughness, and at times Paul himself sounds like a track coach or a drill sergeant. But the heart of his message, he says, is something very different. The heart is God's suffering on the cross for us. God is not someone you go to who can help you escape suffering. And God is not someone to focus on so that you won't think about suffering. God enters into your suffering and shares it. And as you draw close to God in Christ you become more tender, not less, more vulnerable to the hurt that other people are experiencing and to the pain of God's unrequited love for humanity.

The truth about God, Paul says, is discovered in the story of Jesus—in the reality that God's idea of power and being a king is seen in the way Jesus lived and died. The truth about God—and therefore the truth about life—is not something that you can find by seeking it with

your intellect or through spiritual exercise. Revelation is top-down. We can't find God. God plopped down in our midst in human form and spoke to us and showed us what his love is like by giving up his life for us. But then—and Paul will spend the last part of this letter on this subject—God did something even more difficult to believe by raising the dead Jesus to a new life that we can share.

The crowd wants something else, Paul says. They want miracles. They want deep lectures on spirituality. Nowadays they want to preacher to tell them how to have good sex and be successful at work. They want bread and circuses. But we proclaim Christ crucified, a scandal to some and foolishness to others. I decided not to give them what they wanted, but to know just one thing: Jesus Christ and him crucified.

As long as you eat this bread and drink this cup, Paul says later in the same letter, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. That's why we do this so often, why some churches do it every week—so that whatever else we might talk about, however we might get sidetracked on our own issues, we will always come back to this and say “this much I know is true,” this one thing I know: Jesus Christ died for our sins. That is the center of everything we know about God and everything we know about how the world works. It is the bedrock of our reality and the rest of our sense of the world is built on that foundation. God loved us even when we killed him. God knows every terrible thing we go through. And God in weakness took the very worst that evil could throw at him and came out alive, still loving, still forgiving. Thanks be to God.