

Sermon draft

Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16)

Sermon: “Spiritual Wisdom”

The Nativity of Our Lord was six weeks ago and the Feast of the Epiphany was a month ago, Transfiguration Sunday is only three weeks in the future. March 1 is Ash Wednesday. The Festival of the Resurrection of Our Lord is April 16. We are now well into a Epiphany season. This is a time to focus on Christ’s mission, beginning with his Baptism by John and climaxed by the march he will begin after that glorious transfiguration, which concludes the present season. That is to say it’s all about the cross!

The movement of the season reminds us—as do today’s lessons. The *Gospel* includes these powerful words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: **“I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them”** (Matthew 5:17). This points us to a visual sermon on a different mount in which Jesus Christ filled to its fullest significance every part of the Law by offering himself as sacrifice and substitute. In the *Collect of the Day* we prayed that the Lord will “keep [his] family the Church continually in the true faith,” which is centered in the cross and resurrection of Christ. This, Christ crucified and nothing but Christ crucified is why “all nations” extol the Lord, for “great is his steadfast love” and faithfulness (*Gradual*, Ps 117:1–2a).

The event today is about someone important and something significant. Super Bowl LI will be played at Reliant Stadium in Houston, Texas. We've already heard plenty about the New England Patriots and the Atlanta Falcons. There have been plenty of words. There has been an abundance of "lofty speech" and "wisdom" from players and coaches, from fans and commentators, in print and on TV and on countless sports talk shows.

But, in a week of media blitz, with thousands of reporters grabbing and grasping for any kind of story, most of it has really been saying a lot about nothing. And the game will settle it all. Someone will do something spectacular. Or something will happen to someone that's unexpected and either awesome or awful.

All that is the complete opposite of how Paul addresses the Church at Corinth in the second chapter of his first epistle. Paul says he *didn't* come to them with lofty speech and wisdom. He *didn't*, in fact, have a lot to say—at least not about a lot of different things. Certainly, he *didn't* say a lot about nothing.

So here's what *is* before us in today's text: Paul's words are filled with a triple negation—not, no one, nothing—that becomes wonderfully positive. In fact, from this Word of God we will discover and rejoice that nothing means everything.

What do we *want* to see and hear? What do we *need* to see and hear? What do the redeemed people of God need to hear? What does the fallen world need to hear? This is what Paul addresses when he says to the Corinthians in our text: ***"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"*** (v 2).

The Gospel does *not* rest on and is *not* revealed by the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. For Paul did *not* come proclaiming with lofty speech or wisdom. ***“I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom”*** (v 1).

In fact, ***“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.”*** (v9) Yet Epiphany light has revealed the promised Savior to a blinded world still trapped in the darkness since our fall into sin.

We get impressed by human achievements in science and medicine. We are impressed with sports figures as they break world records all the while taking the Word of God and what He has done for granted. Some even neglecting or despising preaching and the Sacraments.

It is ***“not a wisdom of this age”*** through which the Gospel is learned (v 6), but it is only when God works his revelation, for ***“we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God”*** (v 12).

Indeed, Paul’s speech and message ***“were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”*** (v 4b), ***“the power of God”*** (v 5b).

Because the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church” (Small Catechism), ***“no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”*** (v 11b)

“None of the rulers of this age understood” God’s ***“secret and hidden wisdom”*** and, in ignorance, they crucified the Lord of glory.

They did not, they could not understand that God's wisdom was greater and that it had been in place "***before the ages***" (v 7).

They did not understand—and, without the Spirit's work, neither do we what God prepared and what the Spirit made known.

Truly, *no one* can grasp God's eternal plan, from first promise to final fulfillment and future glory. *No one* can grasp how God thinks and, so, how he acts—that he acts not in judgment and condemnation, but in mercy and grace, in kindness and love. *No one* can discover the Good News of salvation. We try to figure God out, but we fail.

Our struggles can and should turn us from our attempts at spiritual knowledge and insight to looking at the Word. But we continue to look up or look inside—both are theologies of glory—rather than to look down at the written and revealed Scriptures.

Indeed, we know nothing! A professor of ethics presented his college students with a hypothetical problem: "A man has syphilis, and his wife has tuberculosis. They have already had four children: one died, the other three have what is considered to be a terminal illness. Now the mother is pregnant again. What would you recommend that she do? Should she proceed and deliver her unborn child, or should she abort the child and spare everyone, especially the child, a lot of grief and anguish?"

Well, following a spirited discussion, the majority of the class decided that the mother should abort the unborn child instead of risking the possibility of bringing another sickly child into the world.

Then, following this conclusion, the professor added, "Fine, abort the child! But do you realize that you've just killed Ludwig von Beethoven?"

That's right, Beethoven! And just how different our world would be without his artistic contribution!

Well, thankfully, Beethoven's parents didn't abort him—they didn't do such things much in those days!—and our world today has been greatly enriched as a result. Even before Beethoven's conception, God knew him and all he would accomplish, just as he knew Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5), just as he knows every child he allows to be conceived, just as knew each one of us.

Our text reveals the heart of Paul's missionary efforts. More than that, it reveals the living heart of the Church, of the Church's life and identity, and of the Church's mission and proclamation:

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v 2). This is the truth. This is the message.

This is the task. This wasn't just for Paul to get right as he wrote to the Corinthian Christians.

This is for the Church of all times and all places.

This is not simply saying “in Christ alone.” This is not simply repeating the Reformation mantra “solus Christus” (Christ alone) throughout this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation. And this is not just talking about Jesus a great deal which, we pray, most preachers and churches do without fail.

Well, yes, we must talk about Jesus Sunday after Sunday, but Paul doesn't tell us—tell you—to do this just any old way. Instead he says, “**I decided to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**” For the cross must be at the center of our proclamation, because this is how Jesus Christ is made known. And nothing else matters, or else our sin still matters. And guilt still matters. And shame still matters. And separation from the holy God still matters. And eternal damnation still matters.

But because of Jesus' death, as both our substitute and our sacrifice, now forgiveness matters. Redemption matters. Freedom matters. Restoration matters.

This is why we can and should sing these words:
When I behold Jesus Christ, True God who died for me, I wonder much at His love As He hung on the tree. What kind of love is this? What kind of love is this? You showed Your love, Jesus, there To me on Calvary. (LSB 542:1)

The commercials before and during and after today's Super Bowl want us to notice and know a lot of things. Advertisers are betting millions on it! But the contrast today is this: the cross alone, just the one message of Christ crucified is the never-ending truth that the Church proclaims, that the Christian affirms, and that the Holy Spirit uses to redeem and rescue and restore sinners. With Paul I say, with Paul we say: ***"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."***

Amen