

## **Fools and Sages**

### 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

It is the sad truth that you sometimes get to know people better in death than in life. My mother was one of those people. At her funeral people told me all kinds of interesting things about her that I never knew, stories I had never heard before. I went home that night with a different picture of her as a person, and not just my mother. Her papers, the boxes and boxes of things she had saved over the years also taught me a lot, like the fact that she was apparently quite a handful in her youth. I think she may be the only person I know who failed PE; basically, from what I gathered from her teacher's note, because she couldn't play nice with her peers, or her teacher. Evidently she had, as we euphemistically say, an attitude.

I'm not sure why she kept those comments from her teacher all those years; if it were me I certainly wouldn't have wanted something that showed me in such an unflattering light to become public property. "Look here everyone – don't be like Janet. For heaven's sake, learn from her mistakes and be a better person than she was, and not just so you can pass gym class."

We laugh, but that's essentially what Paul's letters to the church in Corinth are: dirty laundry aired for all the world – and all the ages – to see and learn from. The situation at Corinth always makes me think of that famous quote, "no man (or in this case, church) is completely useless – he can always serve as a bad example." And a bad example they were. They struggled mightily with behavioral and ethical problems like sexual immorality and class discrimination. They struggled with theological issues, like whether or not it was okay to eat meat that had been sacrificed at pagan temples, or whether or not the bodily resurrection of Jesus was to be understood literally or metaphorically. And the list goes on. It was like the church just couldn't get its act together. They walked the thin line between orthodoxy and heresy, and they were the most fractious bunch anyone ever encountered inside the walls of a church, and as even-tempered and pastoral as Paul tried to be with them in his letters, you can tell that what he'd really like to do is deliver that message himself and throttle them all in person with his own hands.

And so, for 2,000 years, unsuspecting church members have probably sat in the pews when the pastor preached from Corinthians and thought, is he/she trying to tell us something?

Today, here, the answer is, no, of course not. But you don't have to be like the Corinthians to get something out of letters to the Corinthians. You don't have to be a rotten church to find something in Paul's words to take to heart.

So, with that background and that disclaimer, let's get back to the second chapter.

If Paul were asked to name one overarching problem at Corinth, he would probably have characterized it as dis-unity. There were quarrels, lawsuits filed against one another, warring factions, and that lack of unity played itself out in a variety of ways. What he's addressing in these first few chapters is their arrogance, their intellectual snobbery, if that seems a kinder, gentler accusation.

According to Paul's informants, what had happened is that after he left them several other teachers had stepped into leadership positions, which is as it should be. But then the people of the church started aligning themselves with the teachings of this person or that person, and claiming that they had the truth, or that the teachings of their leader were superior to those of the other guys'. Their baptism was the proper one, which somehow made them better, more spiritual. Their Sunday School class' understanding of God is far superior to the one down the hall, except that if you ask the class down the hall they'll tell you that they happen to know that they know more, because that other class only uses scripture, and they bring in all kinds of experts to talk to them and read other kinds of books as well. Their knowledge of God is far most sophisticated. And then there is the class that memorizes a lot of verses and uses the word Jesus a lot. They, too, are staunch in their belief that they hold the true keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Now, I happen to know that every one of you adults here is extremely partial to your Sunday School class, and if anyone were to ask, you would endorse it enthusiastically to anyone looking for a class. But I've never heard anyone say that Steve Bader is the only one teaching the truth here, or that the people in Joel's class are better Christians than the folks in the other classes. Competing church leaders and playing the "my teacher knows more than your teacher" games clearly isn't a problem here. But there is a bigger issue behind their quarreling about whose teacher is better, and that is epistemology: How do we know what we know? (plus I get to use a big word I learned in college and haven't found a reason to use since).

I have very clear beliefs about matters of life and death, and heaven and hell, and God and mortals. I am pretty certain when it comes to my understanding of life and meaning and purpose, and what God is like and what God expects of me, and how God deals with humanity, and me in particular. But how have I acquired that knowledge? What is it that has shaped my belief system?

The people in the church in Corinth would have said that their knowledge was shaped and informed by the teachers and leaders they followed. Being good Presbyterians, you and I are just as likely to say that it is because we educate ourselves. We know what we know because we have been taught to dig deep into the scriptures, to understand the world in which they were written and how it is relevant today in a different kind of world. We read books by learned people who teach us to wrestle with scripture and think about it in new ways. We understand what sort of God God is (and isn't) and what the call of Jesus means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through reason, study, and critical thinking. As one of the quotes on our denomination's website says, being Presbyterian means you don't have to check your brain at the door.

When I was in college I had to read a book called Knowing God. Knowing God. Seeing the title of it for the first time was like being kicked in the gut. I was an A student when it came to church. I went to all the Bible studies they offered. I read. I knew all the answers to all the questions we were asked, I memorized huge chunks of the scripture. I knew....about God. I never really thought about the fact that there was a difference between knowing about God, and actually knowing God.

I think that's what Paul is getting at here. Wisdom, real wisdom, is knowing God, and that doesn't come from studying, from being "thinking Christians." Knowing God – not just about God – doesn't come from anything we can put into our own heads, any intellectual effort on our parts. We can't think our way into the heart of God. We can't learn the mind of God by reading; whether it's Marcus Borg or Max Lucado you're into. In fact, Paul tells them, if you go thinking about God relying on the world's kind of wisdom, the kind that is based only on reason and learning, you are going to end up with a God who looks a whole lot like we do; a God who has the same world view we do, a God who shares the same standards and prejudices and righteous indignations we have. A reasonable God wouldn't bear much resemblance to the true God.

The only way we can know God is through the power of the Holy Spirit. True wisdom isn't fed at the library, but at the cross. It is given to us. One commentator described it as the difference between Babel and Sinai. At Babel, humanity tried to make the ascent to the realm of God under its own initiative and power. At Sinai, God came down to humanity.

So is Paul saying that the study of scripture is fruitless, or that reading the thoughts and work of others is wrong? I don't think that is what he's saying, unless, of course, it leads to religious elitism, or thinking that you are right, and everyone is wrong... or that making the mistake in thinking that knowing about God and the Bible makes you a spiritual person. Christian "education" certainly has its place.

I think what he would say is even more important, though, is Christian formation. He's extending the invitation to the spiritual life, not the well-informed life. He is urging us to go deeper, to not just load up our brains with knowledge, but to feel that deep hunger and thirst we have for connection to God, to be satisfied by God, and only God. I think what he would urge us to hear in his words is an invitation to a different kind of religious life – perhaps a bit less intellectually rigorous, a bit less busy with inconsequential work, and a lot more still and open to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit inside of us. What he is urging us toward is thinking less about God, and listening more for the still, small voice of God; speaking with less conviction about what you know God thinks and wants and does, and just being quiet and open and available; being still, and being with God.

If you think about it, it's easy to see why the Christians in Corinth got themselves in such trouble. Wisdom, philosophy, passionate debates about life and its purpose were an integral part of the Greek culture that surrounded them. Rigorous intellectual pursuits were a part of their world. But being smart, being right – or at least thinking you are – doesn't make you happy. It doesn't bring you peace. And it certainly doesn't build community.

And aren't those the two things that we really crave? Peace and community? Close communion with God and with each other?

Don't be satisfied with what you get out of a book, or a discussion, or even a really good sermon. Now, can the Holy Spirit teach you and speak to you through any and all of those things? Of course. The Spirit can and does. But go deeper. Nurture your inner spiritual life, too. Don't just know about God. Be still, and know God.