

Year A, 5th Sunday After Epiphany

February 5, 2017

By Thomas L. Truby

1 Corinthians 2:1-16 and Matthew 5:13-20

The Big Difference

God's wisdom was hidden for a long time. But it's not hidden anymore. Now we can see it and Paul talks about. In speaking to the people of Corinth he was quite self-disclosing when he told them, "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I didn't come preaching God's secrets to you like I was an expert in speech or wisdom. I had made up my mind not to think about anything while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and to preach him as crucified."

Paul didn't come with charts and a pointer to convince us of something. He didn't present words laced with double meaning and exploitable ambiguity. He stripped his speech of manipulative words.

Paul knew how to inspire audiences with slick speech. He had once convinced the religious establishment in Jerusalem to entrust him with the task of destroying the spreading Jesus movement. But now, years later, he renounced his rhetorical skills and approached people with only Jesus Christ and to preach him as crucified.

This time he stood before them "with weakness, fear, and a lot of shaking." I know what that shaking is like. When I am really in touch and speaking God's truth, and I know I am violating the way the world looks at things, the way my culture looks at things, the way I myself was taught; my whole body shakes. Breaking popular opinion and subverting the mandates of the world out of commitment to the truth of Jesus Christ and of him crucified shakes me to the core. Afterward I am exhausted and sometimes withdraw a bit at coffee hour so that I can recover.

Paul, in this remarkably candid disclosure says "My message and my preaching weren't presented with convincing wise words but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power." The word "Spirit" is capitalized because Paul believes a new entity has joined them. Something has happened that almost everyone feels that opens them to a truth deeper than they know how to contain.

Some Saran Wrap has been torn away and they are in direct contact with reality. Is it the rivalry all humans dwell in that suddenly dissipates and their relationship with God, themselves and each other becomes direct? Something is different and it's in the air between them. Their focus has shifted and transcended them; even the children and the infants among them sense it. Paul

calls it a demonstration of the Spirit. A new entity is with them and this entity vibrates with power.

Paul goes on, "What we say is wisdom to the mature. It isn't wisdom that comes from the present day or from today's leaders who are being reduced to nothing." Being reduced to nothing! Paul says today's leaders are being reduced to nothing! Bush, Obama, Trump and Putin would all be surprised to hear that. Could it be the growing awareness of the scapegoating mechanism that preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified sets loose in the world is reducing all of today's leaders to nothing? The mature see this and more and more of us are becoming mature.

A deeper wisdom is taking hold and it is subverting the old wisdom rooted in might makes right. We know there is something wrong with all our institutions and that they must be fixed in order to work. Right now we are at the stage where we are tearing many of them out but we don't know what to build in their place. An old wisdom is running aground.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us that we are salt. Does that mean we know about God's secret wisdom? Is that what makes us salty? Paul says God determined this wisdom in advance, before time began, for our glory. God was working for our benefit in a way beyond our imagination before the world began. It's so good we have trouble believing it and it's for our glory, not God's glory. It's from God but for us.

Those whose lamp is brightly lit know God's wisdom cannot be understood by present-day rulers because if they did understand it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory! When we know that God works through self-giving love rather than other-sacrificing hatred and division, we don't crucify the Lord of glory; we fall down and worship him like the three wise men.

Do the world and its present day leaders believe in self-sacrifice and forgiveness as the power of God? No, they believe in the power of their military and in their capacity to impose their will on their neighbor even to the point of building a wall and making their neighbor pay for it. Can you image the kind of enmity that wall builds?

God's wisdom embraces self-sacrifice and forgiveness; that's the secret hidden from the beginning of time and now revealed in Jesus and him crucified. Living out self-sacrifice, co-suffering love and forgiveness makes us the salt of the earth.

We have something unique that the world does not have. As Paul says "God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being."

Where did this unique perspective come from? Paul answers “God has revealed things to us through the Spirit.” And again the word “Spirit” is capitalized. It’s an entity, a divine force, a mystery that we have been graced to experience.

“The Spirit searches everything, including the depth of God.” When we dig into the meaning of our lives and of the scriptures, the Spirit is searching for the depth of God. When we pray in response to the latest shocking news it’s the Spirit active in us. When we listen to someone for whom we care deeply and wonder how they think and see the world, it’s the Spirit searching everything, including the depth of God, hidden in the other.

I am convinced the Spirit works through poetry, meditation, the arts, music, dance and even science. It is such an invigorating way of life; why would we turn away from it?

Paul goes on, “We haven’t received the world’s spirit but God’s Spirit so that we can know the things given to us by God.” This unique insight that explains the world, that the world cannot see, isn’t something we can claim credit for; it comes from outside, the realm beyond human competition and strife.

Do you see the big difference? Spirit language does not come from a place infected by rivalry, jealousy and malice. It has no “over-against-ness” in it. It knows that all are children of God and senses no need to put some down and exalt others. It has no manipulative, division-maintaining agenda. Spiritual people get this but unspiritual people see it as foolishness that can’t be understood.

God’s wisdom is grounded in non-violent, non-rivalrous, and totally forgiving love. It contrasts sharply with human wisdom where every word and action is subject to rivalry and fear, vengeance and hierarchy.

Paul says “Spiritual people comprehend everything, but they themselves aren’t understood by anyone” (who is not spiritual). It’s like people who have been grasped by God’s wisdom see in color whereas unspiritual people see only in black and white. Spiritual people have a tremendous advantage because they can see in both black and white and color; and reality is much more interesting then.

To swing back to Matthew, our saltiness comes from being attune to the wisdom of God; that wisdom that knows about sacrificial self-giving rather than sacrificing the other, that knows about co-suffering love rather than making sure only the other suffers, and that knows about a forgiveness so deep it leaves no enmity in its wake. This wisdom knows we are the light of the world, a city on top of a hill that cannot be hidden. Amen.