

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

St Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, "Preach the Gospel always. Use words only when necessary." There is no record of him actually saying that exact thing, but the thought is expressed in his writing. And he did say something similar, "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking IS our preaching." Anyway, there is a truth to the saying. How we live out our faith, how we demonstrate that our faith has made a difference in our life is very important. It is a witness to the power of Christ working in us and through us... it is a witness to how our relationship with Christ has changed us and brought us closer in our relationship to God.

In our text this morning, Paul speaks of focusing only on "Christ and him crucified." This focus is solitary, and it is a laser like focus that makes "the main thing the main thing." In other words, it's not about us, it is about Jesus. It is about relationship with Jesus as Jesus connects us to the living God through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Paul also talks about how we relate that gift to others. And he uses his own approach to teaching as an example: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters," he writes, "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. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words

of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (NRSV).

Now, we need to know something very important here. Paul was no sloth. He was no slouch when it came to education. He was a Roman citizen. He used that citizenship in the most powerful empire of the time to his advantage as often as he could. He was well versed in the teachings of Plato and Aristotle and was a master in the use of rhetoric and debate. He was a pious Jew who had studied with Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the most noted Jewish theologians of the time. He had been a zealous Pharisee, "a Pharisee among Pharisees" as he phrased it, who had been dedicated to squashing all heresies in Judaism. He had been especially efficient and merciless in his crusade to stamp out this heretical sect attached to the crucified Rabbi from Nazareth. That is until his encounter with the living Christ as he traveled on the road to Damascus. Now, Paul is a dedicated and zealous evangelist for "Christ and him crucified," sharing the knowledge and relationship that he had experienced with the risen Christ.

Wisdom is the word Paul comes back to again and again. We could throw in mystery as well. Lofty words that we might call rhetoric are also present in the text. All of them point to knowledge, at least on the surface. What do you know that you can pass on to us? That may have been the question on people's minds as they came to hear Paul when he rolled into town. What can you pass on, what can you teach, what do you know, Paul?

Paul says that's the wrong question. Not that there aren't things to know. Not that there aren't words to use or stories to tell. But the premise of the question is what is giving him pause. He says he didn't come with a body of knowledge. And he did this by choice. It wasn't that he didn't know stuff. He

was a Pharisee; he knew plenty. He could talk your ear off with all the stuff he knew. But he chose to set all that aside.

“I decided,” he wrote, “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” For Paul, “What do you know?” is the wrong question. The better, more proper question is “Whom do you know?” This mystery of God, this wisdom that is beyond the wisdom of this age, this Spirit that is not the spirit of the age, is a *who* not a *what*.

OK, so our content is information about Jesus, right? Well, Paul would argue, no, not really. It is something much riskier than information. It is *relationship*. Paul says he came with fear and trembling; he came in weakness. All he had to offer was himself and the Christ who lives within him. He had no argument to make, no knowledge to pass on; he just had who he is and is becoming in Christ.

Think about this for a moment. We in The United Methodist Church adhere to a mission statement that says that we are “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” That’s complicated enough as it is. But if Paul is right, then we are doing it wrong when we give information to people to help them become disciples. We’ve lost something of significance when we reduce this process to information we can pass on, or even put in a pamphlet and hand out to people.

Paul says he was among the people not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power. What does this mean? What did he offer?

If making disciples is the core reason for our existence, then we need to take it seriously and figure out ways to go about doing it more effectively and efficiently – not for the survival of the church, but because that is our call as

Christ followers. So, we work within the congregation, helping one another grow in faith to become the disciples they were called to be. Paul calls them saints; remember last chapter! But we also work in our wider community, where we attempt to “see all the people” – not just our people, the people within the walls of the church, but all the people – the people around us as we work and worship; the hurting and the hungry; the distracted and the cynical – all the people. The searchers and those who don’t know there’s anything to search for – all the people.

And what do we have to offer them? Nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified. But again, not *information* about this Christ, though there is a story to tell and knowledge to share. Not a *process* of joining the church, though there is a family who will gather them in and help them be a part of the whole. Not levels to attain and achievements to unlock, though there are processes and systems that help us keep focused on the task. No, what we have is what Paul had, and that is nothing but himself and the Christ that dwells within.

Paul talks about sharing an inner experience, wisdom taught by the Spirit. But he also talks about how the “unspiritual” can’t receive this wisdom or understand these gifts. So, are we supposed to talk to insiders only? Are we ultimately concerned only with those people who already have faith, already have a relationship with Jesus? Of course not. His point is, we must watch our language. We can’t lead with the language of faith. Telling someone “the Bible says this or the Bible says that” won’t get you very far when your hearer doesn’t accept the authority of the Bible yet. But if our insider words aren’t that helpful, what are we left with? The same thing Paul was left with when he showed up in Corinth – nothing but Jesus. And a lot of fear and trembling. In the end, it is about relationships. Ultimately, it is about a relationship with Jesus Christ. But it might begin with a relationship with you. With us. With disciples of Jesus who

know nothing but Christ and are willing to demonstrate what God is doing in their lives each and every day. This is a call to be real as we go about the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

This relationship thing that Paul is talking about, this relationship with “Jesus Christ and him crucified” is the real deal. It’s the “real thing.” Maybe the world doesn’t know it, but folks are looking for answers to life’s questions and they are lost in the disappointments that religion offers. Especially when religion is often times seeking power and prestige.

But when we offer Jesus and him crucified, we don’t offer power and prestige. We offer service clothed in humility that leads to relationship... relationship with the living God who loved us enough to die for us so that we might live. How do we do it? By living our life in such a way that folks will look at us and say, “I don’t know what you’ve got, but I want it for myself.”

One day at a time.

One life at a time.

One relationship at a time.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.