

Isaiah 29: 13-16
1 Corinthians 1:1-2:5
February 24, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Lent

A big barrier to understanding the apostle Paul is that his letters are collected in a book called the Bible and treated as sacred scripture. Why is this a problem? Because when a human word is set aside as *God's word*, we miss the human being who wrote the words. We miss the humanity of the person whose thoughts are the outcome of real life experience. Human words, in this case Paul's, are turned into Truth which must be accepted as being from God. The words themselves are taken out of the context of human experience and we are presented with theological propositions.

To separate the message from the messenger is to separate the message from God. Why is this so? First of all, as the Hebrews knew and we are only beginning to understand, body and spirit are one. There is no spiritual compartment of human life. Every cell of every

organ is alive with the energy of God. In Acts, Paul captures this when he speaks of the God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” (17:28)

Neuroscientists have discovered that the sheathes of neural pathways of the brain have the same properties as our skin. They have rediscovered what the Hebrew culture has known for thousands of years: We do not have a body. We *are* a body. Through the insights from particle physics we learn that every *thing*, including humans *is energy*. Even the most solid object is made up of collections of energy. Because of this, everything is interrelated. Our lives are affected by what goes on around us. By the same token, what we feel and what we do affects others. Remember the wave of emotion that broke upon us when the murders in Sandy Hook took place. An event two hundred miles away affecting people we did not know was emotionally devastating to us—and not just to us, to millions of people around the country.

That is why we must hear Paul's message not as God's word somehow separated from his life. The word of God courses through his entire being courage, his flaws, and his determination—through all of his best and worst qualities. Most of all the power of God flows through the full humanity of Paul and his transparent, authentic experience of Jesus Christ risen from the dead and his yearning that every human being share in the good news that has been given to him.

We too are whole people. God's love in Jesus Christ seeks to course through *our* entire beings. God is equally proclaimed in our best and worst selves. We learn from Paul that the very things of which we are ashamed and believe disqualify us from salvation are the very things that Jesus has redeemed. Because God in Jesus Christ redeemed our *whole selves*, the very things that cause us to wince in embarrassment and regret are completely swallowed up in love. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "Death is swallowed up in victory!" And again, "There is nothing that can separate us from the

love of god that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And again, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ.”

For Paul, the challenge of the spiritual life is not to try to be good. It is to accept redemption. Paul for me is a mentor and guide who offers his experience, strength and hope; not as a saint who has it all together, but as a fellow human being on the same journey that you and I are on.

Paul’s humanity is evident in the opening of his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. Paul founded this congregation in the year 50 CE. At this time Corinth is a thriving commercial center under Roman rule. Since Paul believes that all people are children of God and that station in life is meaningless to God, the Corinthian congregation attracts an amazing diversity of people. There are Jews and former pagans. There are poor people just scraping by and wealthy merchants. There are women who for the first time are permitted leadership roles in the congregation. There are slaves on equal footing with their masters. In short, in the Corinthian congregation there is a community that outside

of the congregation has very little in common. But within the community they are united by their having accepted the love of God in Jesus Christ.

The mere existence of this community is a witness to the reality of a different order of life. It is in stark contrast to the stratified structure of Roman society. As such it is seen as subversive to the stability of the empire and is treated with deep suspicion and sometimes persecution. While Paul is there, the force of his presence holds the community together. His run ins with the authorities unite the congregation. But Paul is a missionary, not a pastor. He has other congregation to whom he must pay attention. And thus it is while he is in Ephesus, that a delegation from Corinth comes to report that this fragile community is being torn apart by factions. These are real people. There are representatives of Chloe, a woman leader in the church and Stephanas who helpfully reminds Paul that that Paul had baptized him. Paul sends his reply including Sosthenes, perhaps a former adversary now disciple.

Paul is clearly disturbed by this news. It seems that the congregation is regressing into groups who identify with the people who initiated them into the faith by baptism. There are quarrels. Apollos is better than Paul is better than Cephas (Peter). Even Jesus has become a sect in this division! As we read further on in the letter, these divisions are just the iceberg tip of many other divisions and conflicts including the toleration of morally offensive behavior.

Thus Paul declares at the beginning of his letter that the real source of the conflict is the loss of the unifying unity in Jesus Christ. The loss of a common devotion to Jesus Christ and him crucified has led people to think that their individual "wisdom" can be favorably compared to that of others. People have started to take each other's moral and spiritual inventory. In short the pull of the world has infiltrated the community.

Thus Paul hammers away at the uselessness of worldly wisdom. It seduces people to think they have a unique and superior understanding. It causes them to use their own opinions as the

benchmark for how others should live. In truth, Paul says, there is only one source of true wisdom: Jesus Christ whose folly and weakness are more powerful than the strength of human opinions.

Not surprisingly Paul uses himself as a model. Physically unimpressive. Not a great and polished speaker. The very embodiment of folly and weakness. We note some sarcasm here. Paul is a force of nature and knows it. He uses this to humble those who attack him in his absence. Yet even if Paul's pride and even vanity shows through, we cannot miss the passion and genuine concern that the congregation is at risk and he will spare no effort to set it back on the right course.

Friends, I ask you to feel Paul's passion yearning across the centuries calling us to our true purpose: to be a diverse community of faith where all are welcome who are humbled by and united by one common faith in Jesus Christ. Not that we agree about everything; but in the words of President George Herbert Bush:

I take as my guide the hope of a saint:
In crucial things, unity—In important things diversity—
In all things generosity. Amen

