

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25
March 8, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

“Knowledge is power.” We hear this phrase so often that I believe it has become one of the unconscious assumptions of our culture. The one who “knows more” wields power because we equate knowing more with knowing what is right and what is best. Within limits this makes sense. There is a reason you do not come to me for advice on how to invest your savings for long term financial security. There is a reason you do not come to me to get a hip replacement.

The problem with the phrase “knowledge is power” lies not in the word “knowledge.” It is with the word “power.” In our world power indicates the ability to control our destinies. It also, and dangerously, implies the ability to control the destinies of others. People who hold this kind of knowledge we revere as experts. We are drawn to their confidence and certainty. We look for this quality in all of our leaders and decision makers.

Yet the tragic truth is that history is littered with the damage done by people and groups of people who believed themselves to “know” absolutely what the right path was. The terrible truth is that we are just as attracted to experts and the leaders who exude utter certainty than ever before. We demand that political leaders project absolute certainty about what should be done and then spend the rest of their term attacking them for disappointing us.

The real danger of the one who believes that knowledge is power is that he or she comes to believe that what she or he knows is so right that the so called knowledge of everyone else is inferior. Not only are the thoughts and opinions of others inadequate, but in time those who hold these perspectives are pushed to the side and are seen as disloyal. They are even

seen to be sabotaging the unified march of the *people*. Further, when someone is absolutely right, then whatever means are used to achieve the so-called “right” goal, no matter how immoral or unethical, are justified.

It is relatively easy to point out this pattern in history. It is easy to show its destructive presence in every human institution and perspective. Religions demonstrate the worst of these qualities since they suppose they “know” who God is and what God wants. But what is the alternative?

The apostle Paul sees his congregation in Corinth being torn apart by experts. “I belong to Peter.” “I belong to Apollos.” I belong to “Paul.” There are even some who “belong to Jesus!” To the Corinthians, each one of these figures represents the “right way” of following Jesus. It is not enough that their particular path be *right*; it is necessary that the other paths be *wrong*. The Corinthian church has gone from being an alliance of differing perspectives united by a greater commitment to Jesus to becoming a collection of quarrelling advocacy groups.

Seen by Paul, but invisible to the various rival cliques is the larger tension between Jewish and Greek philosophies. This is a community of Jewish Christians and Greek converts. They each bring their unspoken assumptions to their debates. They may go to the same worship service; but secretly they are confident that they are nearer the truth than their sister or brother. This unspoken judgment is a sleeping serpent in any congregation and when there is conflict it rears its venomous head with heartbreaking results.

In his typical style, Paul confronts this situation head on. He is passionate. He does not take sides. He labels the so-called knowledge of the experts in Corinth as ultimate folly. He tells them that their so-called knowledge about Jesus and God could not be further from reality. To

believe that your position is absolutely right is to be utterly wrong. To be absolutely right and judgmental of others who disagree with you is to be more wrong than they are.

In a brilliant debate move, Paul claims that what is foolish to the experts is in fact the truth. “Jews seek signs, Greeks seek wisdom but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.”

As we saw last week, to Jews the idea of a crucified messiah was an impossibility. To the Greeks the same was simply irrational. But Paul argues that human reason is extremely limited. If we believe only what we have been taught to believe we fit all of our experience into what we already know—or think we know. That which agrees with what we already believe we trust as truth. That which challenges what we already believe we reject as false teaching.

But for Paul being a Christian is not about believing right things. It is about proclaiming a reality found only in what pure reason rejects as impossible: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah crucified, buried and risen from the dead. For Paul this is a dogma shattering proclamation. It is only understood by faith. It is only understood by surrendering our precious need for absolute and logically consistent certainty. In this renunciation of certainty and this trust in the truth of a logical impossibility comes true freedom—the freedom to *not know absolutely; the freedom to trust in a mystery* that no one lifetime can comprehend. Paul’s freedom is the freedom to be curious, to explore without fear. It is this freedom which allows us to recognize that, because we do not and cannot understand even a fraction of everything, we have much to learn—especially from people who have a different perspective than ours.

Imagine a community of faith so joined together in the love of God in Jesus Christ that we actually welcome and encourage different perspectives and experience. Imagine a

community that is a safe place to hold divergent views in love and provides the opportunity to grow in understanding. Oh, for such a community! For in such a place is found the true presence of Jesus. Amen.