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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Lectionary Year A: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

By now, you know that I've been engaging in something of a sermon series on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians over the past several weeks, and so we continue again today with First Corinthians, chapter 2, verses 1 through 16.

But let's review where Paul is coming from when he's writing this letter. Let's go back once again to ancient Greece. Let's even go back before the time of Christ. Let's go back to the age of the great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, both of whom I mentioned last Sunday. Remember that Plato and Aristotle were both men whom I read as an undergraduate in college. And they are men who were widely regarded as the wisest of their age, still imparting their wisdom to budding philosophers like myself nearly thirty years ago.

What is it about "philosophy" that attracts the apostle Paul's criticism, though? We know that philosophy (from the Greek word "philo" and the other Greek word "sophia") means love of wisdom. And, as we think about what it means to be philosophical, we know that it means to ask the great questions, and to speak in abstract terms. That's why philosophy is very challenging to a number of people, because we live in a very concrete world. We live in a world of things, of money, and of substance, but not necessarily of ideas. Philosophy is entirely in the realm of ideas, and so among those great questions that philosophy seeks to answer are "What is truth?", "What is beauty?", and "What is justice?"

And, as I mentioned earlier, there were two great philosophers in the ancient

Greek world, first being Plato who died in 348 BC and later being Aristotle who died in 322 BC. We know from their writings that they dealt in these great ideas. They asked the big questions. They asked things like "What is freedom?", "What is truth?", "What is ethical?", and "What is right?" And oftentimes people struggle with these questions, and they may not have the "equipment" to deal with them in the most constructive way. But, if you read philosophy, you might be a little better equipped to handle them.

Now, let's shift gears a little bit to Paul. As I hinted earlier, I am still a student of philosophy, and I enjoy thinking about the great questions. But then we look at Paul and he rejects the whole system of Greek thought outright. He says I am not about philosophy, and I am not about high-minded ideas; rather, I come only to know Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). You see, there's kind of a difference here between what someone like myself spent a great deal of time doing in college (and beyond) and what Paul wants to lift up to the people of Corinth.

Corinth -- being a Greek city -- is a place where some knowledge of these great philosophers I've been talking about would've prevailed. And many of the Corinthians themselves would've been very enamored by people who could orate and philosophize eloquently. But Paul says I'm not going to do any of that. So then what is his answer? He says, "But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7-8).

Paul is talking about a different kind of wisdom. Where the ancient Greek phil-

osophers regarded wisdom as something you climbed a ladder toward, Paul gives us the opposite. This wisdom comes from God. God reaches down through the Holy Spirit to his people and they receive this wisdom that, according to Paul, only those who believe in Christ can receive.

Then we have this great contradiction -- Christ contradicts everything heretofore taught by philosophy. Previously, wisdom was something you could achieve through philosophical reflection, contemplation, and debate...then Jesus turns that entirely around. Jesus is the One who came down from heaven -- the wisdom of God revealed for God's people to receive.

There is, indeed, a major difference here between the ways in which the ancient Greek people thought -- and, presumably, a number of people in Corinth -- and what Paul himself thinks. Remember the ladder image. The philosopher climbs the ladder toward wisdom. It's a goal. But, on the other hand, the Christian receives the Spirit -- wisdom, truth, Jesus Christ himself. That's a gift.

Goal versus gift...something to remember in this framework as we look at the apostle Paul and contrast him with all that prevailed during his time.

Paul lifts himself up as one who embraced the gift. He says, "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power..." (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Paul wasn't this great philosopher who could spin yarns of great wisdom like the philosophers of old. No, he pretty much just told it like it was. He embraced the gift of the Spirit and proclaimed Christ not in "lofty words or wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:1b). He proclaimed Christ plainly, knowing that this was the means by which the people to

whom he preached would be saved. They would receive faith through hearing the Word of God, and by this great gift of faith, the doors to the kingdom of heaven would be opened to them.

A related topic in our exploration of First Corinthians asks the question, "What's different about Christ?" From the apostle Paul, we receive much of what we teach about Christ and what we know about Christ. One major idea here is that in contradicting the world's wisdom, Jesus Christ revealed something not only awe-inspiring and infinitely gracious, but also, to people of the time, something utterly unbelievable if not foolish.

In his death on the cross -- in that moment of weakness and vulnerability -- he revealed God's strength. He did not come on a great white stallion and conquer kingdoms, principalities, and dominions; rather, he died so that we might inherit an eternal kingdom. We've existed for some two thousand years as Christians with, I believe, a rather tenuous grasp on that. For as many people who claim to be Christian, there are fewer -- so it seems -- who understand what that means. Here we are, still some two thousand years later, with Christians believing in something that was never supposed to be -- a faith in the Christ on the great white stallion conquering kingdoms, principalities, and dominions.

But we're not about that. I want to make it extremely clear that our wisdom is precisely that "foolishness" that people outside the church thought it was. Why would you believe in a Lord who accepted defeat and suffered death on the cross? Well, we believe in this Lord because we know that the path to victory comes only through suffering and sacrifice. That is the heart of the Christian message. And as we look to what it means to be Christian, we embrace that sacrifice, that

vulnerability, and that willingness to pay the price for others.

Most ultimately, that was what was revealed in Jesus Christ through his sacrifice on the cross...

So now is the time to receive that wisdom that the world regarded as foolishness, to receive that wisdom that contradicted everything ancient Greek philosophy taught, and to think once again of what Paul says: "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). The spirit of the world is everything that the world would have you believe. But there is something much greater and something much more powerful in what Paul is talking about here -- the Spirit that is from God, the Spirit that gets this unconventional wisdom or "foolishness," to use Paul's word.

Understanding the gifts bestowed on us by God means seeing things in light of faith. Where an ordinary human being not transformed by the grace of God sees scarcity, we see abundance. Where others see gloominess, darkness, and doubt, we see clarity, light, and peace. Having our perspective so transformed by the grace of God, we're able to see things that others can't.

That said, when we leave this place, what are we going to do knowing that we have been transformed by the grace of God to understand gifts bestowed on us by God? What does that mean? Will we see the gifts that we have, and will we comprehend the gift that we can be to others? That's the very root of our existence as Christians and as a church. And, I might add, it is the centerpiece of our ministry as a community of faith.

Let us, therefore, be so oriented to the grace of God. Let us receive the Spirit of wisdom revealed to us in Jesus Christ

that we may be a gift to others,

that we may see the grace of God and be the grace of God to others,

that we may see Jesus Christ and be Christ to others.

We have received something so special and so great in the Good News of Jesus Christ that we really don't have any other choice. This is what we do as the people of God. And may you be so inspired by the Spirit and by God's grace that you go no other way but to be the grace of God to others.

Amen.