

Epiphany 5 “Wisdom of Men vs Power of God” 1 Cor 2 5

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Paul talks a great deal about a secret knowledge, but what is that secret? What is the hidden thing revealed? The Spirit is the medium, the means to reveal the secret, but what is the secret? It is in verse 8. If the rulers of this age, the enemies, the forces of Satan, had known what they were doing, they would never have crucified Christ. For his crucifixion was the rupture of their power over humanity. The secret is the cross. The secret is that by losing, dying, and giving up, God has won the victory that apparent power and success did not, could not win. The secret is that Christianity is not founded upon success and strength, but upon weakness and apparent failure.

The Corinthians are sliding into a Roman culture of power politics in their congregation. Paul is appealing to them to remember who they are in Christ. He was a loser, like Paul's miserable attempts at speaking were not eloquent. But through weakness and humility, God wins the day. Paul did not try to use worldly wisdom, but the power of God's word, that our faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

To ward off the possible misunderstanding that Paul is opposed to wisdom in any form, as if Christianity had no wisdom to offer, he adds this: “Wisdom, however, is what we speak” (2:6). Wisdom, true wisdom, was indeed to be found in the preaching of Paul and his associates. Christ Himself is the wisdom from God, wisdom that brings righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1:30). With a touch of irony, Paul adds that this true Christian wisdom is spoken “among the mature” (2:6); “the mature” appreciate it. Exactly what was on the menu for the more mature we do not know, but it may have included richer insights into the person and work of Christ, the nature of the Trinity, the Sacraments, or the relationship between the OT and the NT.

Paul reminds the Corinthians and us of the unifying focus of our faith. Paul tells the folks in Corinth who are fighting with each other that they need to get their eyes back on Jesus.

He is the one who called them, and He has made them into one body. Paul did not create this church; it was not their doing either. It was God's doing, the creation of Christ.

In the second part of the text, after he has their attention on this, he reminds them that God has given them a great gift, indeed several gifts. While the world does not get it, they do, they have access to the very hidden things of God.

But, frustratingly, he does not actually relate in this text what **are** the hidden things of God which we understand. In fact, as you keep reading, he doesn't really come out and say it. Was it because Paul did not think that it should be put on paper? Remember that the first Christians did not pray the Lord's Prayer publicly. That was reserved for assemblies of the baptized. Is this one of the "secret" mysteries which they did not even mention in sermons if the unbaptized were present? (Augustine is still doing this well into the fifth century. When the sermon text included some of the mysteries of the Holy Communion or something like that he would simply say, I cannot talk more about this here, because some of you are not catechized. I imagine that was a pretty strong inducement to enroll in catechism classes.)

So, what are these secrets which Christians know and the world considers folly. Considering he was talking to a group of folks who were in open conflict, I would guess it has something to do with forgiveness and reconciliation. It is fallen human nature to think that the only answer to someone hurting me is to hurt back, or if that is impossible to bear a grudge, hurt someone else, or in some way to balance scales. When it comes to forgiveness, the world is just dense about this. It thinks forgiveness is folly, it is being a doormat, and it is the absolute wrong way to go.

But the Christian knows something else about it, or at least, we should. I am not sure, however, whether many Lutherans really believe it. Forgiveness unleashes the power of God's love in a community of people. That love binds us together

and makes us a much better and more joyful community. Sins are sometimes the occasion for us to become much better...if they are forgiven.

In the Christian practice of forgiveness, we do a number of things which when taken together form the totality of forgiveness.

1. **We acknowledge that what the other person did was wrong.** You cannot forgive what is not wrong. This is where most of us in fact mess up at forgiveness. We don't actually forgive the other person; we understand what they have done. Indeed, most apologies are not appeals for forgiveness, they are appeals for understanding. "Sorry I called you a nitwit, I was not feeling well..." That is an appeal for you to understand why I did that, not to forgive it, even though the "sorry" word is used. Christian forgiveness means that I don't listen to or use excuses. We have to stop accepting the reasons for sins, as if they made a difference. I am not against understanding; indeed the world would be better with more understanding, but it is always a poor substitute for forgiveness. We need to simply stop the apology at "I'm sorry." If you put a comma and a "but" after that and include an explanation, then you are asking not for forgiveness but for me to understand it.
2. **We deliberately turn from vengeance, grudge bearing, or any other sort of scale balancing behavior.** We are not going to solve the problem this way. This is a conscious decision on the part of the forgiver. It is turning away from the solutions of the world.
3. **We say that this sin, and this sinner, is one of the reasons Jesus died.** The scales are balanced on Calvary, the penalty is paid in Jesus blood. That authorizes me to tell you that your sin is, in one very real sense, simply gone and the sinner no longer bears the burden/debt of guilt.
4. **We pledge to "remember it red."** I need to explain this. It is Shakespeare who enjoins us to "forgive and forget" not God. While God pledges to remove our sins as far as the east is from the west, He never asks us to forget the sins of another. Indeed, it would not be a smart idea. If someone has stolen, be kind to them, but don't leave your cash lying around to

tempt them. Remember their weakness. You can forgive someone who has abused a child, but you don't hire them as a baby sitter!

In forgiveness, we pledge to remember that past sin is always covered by the blood of Christ, hence "remember it red." I won't ever rub your nose in it again. When we have a fight next week about something else, I won't drag this into the conversation. If I do, the problem is mine, not yours. I am then acting in bad faith.

This ties to both the OT and Gospel lesson rather interestingly. The OT speaks of God present in His serving people. Jesus speaks of being salt and light for the world. The forgiving community is a bright light which calls to people, is intensely attractive to them. It is only as viable as the presence of God in our midst. It only works because it is The Crucified who speaks my words of forgiveness with me, giving them the authority and power to effect what they would claim to do.

The word of the cross is a wisdom surpassing all human understanding (1 Cor 2:9). Human wisdom, with its predilection for spectacular signs and impressive philosophies, had failed to recognize the Lord of Glory in the weak, contradicted, and crucified Jesus. Indeed, no human being would ever have conceived or predicted that God would bring his salvation in this way. But, Paul insists, that way should not be surprising; it is thoroughly in keeping with OT prophecy, where Isaiah foretold that the God whose thoughts and ways are higher than human thoughts and ways (Is 55:8–9) would bring about "new things," "hidden things that you have not known" and have "never heard" (Is 48:6–8; cf. Is 43:19; 44:7).

And all this is freely given to us, a gift, received by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is wisdom indeed! For it leads to forgiveness, life and salvation. Open your ears and receive it. Taste and see that the Lord is good...all the time.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!