

# "The Message...Not the Messenger"

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

February 5, 2017

5th Sunday After The Epiphany

Why do people come to church? It used to be that people didn't give much thought to the *reason* for coming to church. They came out of a sense of duty. Church was just what you and everyone else did on a Sunday morning. But that's all changed now. Now, while some people will still come out of habit or duty, many will come for a specific reason. If you ask people what that reason is, they will give you a variety of answers. Many will say, "I come to church because I like the pastor. His sermons are interesting. He always has a good joke to tell or a funny story to relate. And the message is so profound." Conversely, if you ask people why they do not come to church, they will also give a variety of answers. Many will say, "I don't like the pastor. His sermons are boring and are always the same old thing Sunday after Sunday. They are so basic – no meat to them." Is this a good idea -- to come to church because you like the pastor and his sermons and not come because you don't like the pastor and his sermons? Our text for today would say "no".

Our text was written by the apostle Paul to the Christian church in the city of Corinth. Corinth was a large Greek city and was very cultured. The people in Corinth enjoyed listening to skilled orators. The people wanted to hear speakers with a variety of deep philosophical messages that were interesting and profound. But when Paul came to that city, he had one message: the testimony of God. And that testimony was this: Jesus Christ and His crucifixion. Paul's preaching was about man's sinfulness and God's forgiveness through Jesus' suffering and death on a cross.

This caused a problem for Paul. His message did not seem very interesting to the Corinthians. And, to make matters worse, Paul's speaking skills apparently were not very good. His delivery was not lofty and mesmerizing. His content displayed no deep wisdom. The people listened and were bored and disinterested.

Yet Paul didn't try to change the style of his delivery to become a more polished speaker in order to impress the people. He didn't change the content of his message to attract more people who would like his message better. Why? Because the message was more important than the messenger. Paul's words were more important than his speaking skills and style. The content of the words was more important than how interesting the words were. For you see, they were not really Paul's words, but God's Words. And it is the Word of God alone that has power - power to create the world, power to forgive sin and declare people holy, power to create faith in Jesus Christ, and power to save. Paul said that his words demonstrated the Holy Spirit's power -- not his power. Therefore, the faith of people in Corinth would not be dependent on Paul's speaking, but God's power.

The same is true here today. People may come to church today and expect to hear a good speaker with interesting stories and funny jokes. People may expect to receive a deep and profound spiritual message. People may expect to learn different things from sermons: how to feel good about themselves, how to live a successful life, how to be a good parent, and so on.

However, that is not my calling as your pastor to speak such things. My job is not to give you an interesting talk or tell you funny jokes. My message is not to tell you how to improve your life or how to live happily. My job is to proclaim one message: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Now, like Paul whether I speak skilled and forcefully or weak and awkwardly is not important. It is the message of Jesus Christ and that alone that is important and the reason for you to attend church.

Why is that so important? Consider why you choose a doctor. Do you choose a doctor simply because he is friendly or because he tells funny jokes? No. You want a doctor who is able to examine you, inform you of your illness, and give you the medicine to cure you and restore your health. If a doctor is friendly and funny, that is well and good. But the essential thing which you must have is the cure for your illness.

When a pastor preaches, he tries to do for your soul the same as a doctor does for your body. I cannot stand here and tell you interesting stories to make you feel good about yourselves or tell you

funny jokes to amuse you. I have to inform you of your spiritual "sickness": sin. You have been born with that sickness and are separated from God because of that sickness. You commit sins every day by doing the evil which God forbids and by not doing the good which He commands. These sins are more than regretful imperfections or minor character flaws. These sins earn His anger and punishment for you. That message may not make you laugh or make you feel good about yourselves. In our non-judgmental world with relativistic standards of right and wrong, many people are angered or highly offended by any talk about sin, guilt, and judgment. But I must tell you that message so that I can tell you about the cure.

There is only one cure and it is not you trying to improve yourselves or do a better job of obeying God. The cure for your sickness is God's grace – His undeserved and unmerited love for you. God has been merciful to you, despite your sin. He sent His Son, Jesus, here to take that sin away from you and place it upon Himself. Jesus suffered the punishment which your sins deserved on the cross. Jesus was crucified and died to earn forgiveness for your sins. Jesus died so that you might live and live forever. Jesus rose from the dead to guarantee your salvation.

I joyfully proclaim that message – that cure - to you every Sunday. I tell you that God has been merciful to you, despite the fact that you don't deserve it. I tell you that God has forgiven you even though you may feel guilty and unworthy. I tell you that you have hope for the future – new life with God now and eternal life -- even though this life may seem frustrating and full of trouble and pain.

Now, *how* I or any other preacher proclaims that is not important. Now, this is not an excuse for me to be lazy and stand here on Sunday morning and begin rambling on about whatever comes to mind. I do want to prepare my sermons carefully and communicate clearly. But preaching style itself is not important. Paul says that when he went to Corinth, he was weak, afraid, and trembling. When I began in the ministry, I felt the same -- weak, fearful, and trembling. Paul says that his sermons were not eloquent and wise. Sometimes, I feel the same way -- my preaching is not always fascinating and eloquent. But that doesn't matter. My preaching style earns no forgiveness for you. My skills do not save you.

It is God alone who forgives you. It is His power alone that saves you. He works through my preaching to accomplish forgiveness and salvation. My words demonstrate the Holy Spirit's power, not my skill and power. It is His grace and power that give the forgiveness, help you believe and accept that. Your faith and salvation do not depend on a skilled preacher and interesting sermons. Your faith and salvation depend on God's power. And His power comes to you in His Words.

That means you should come to church to hear the message and receive the cure for your sinfulness, regardless of whether or not you like the pastor or think he's a skilled speaker. You need God's forgiveness and you want the comfort which this gives. God's Word in the sermon provides that. You can receive His blessings whether the sermon is interesting or boring, enjoyable or dull. You can receive His blessings whether I am here preaching that or one of the elders is reading a sermon. You can receive His blessings whether I am the pastor here or, someday, if another pastor is here. The power is in the words and the message, not the preacher and his style.

All pastors are different -- different personalities, different ways to do things, different styles of preaching. I am sure that I am different from Pastor Eckelman, Pastor Nicolaus, or any other pastor serving here in the past 50+ years. It is very easy to compare styles and criticize, saying, "I like Pastor Nicolaus best or I like Pastor Eckelman the best or I like Pastor Schlund the best." But that is not good to do. Pastor Nicolaus did not die on the cross for you. Pastor Eckelman did not earn forgiveness for your sins. Pastor Schlund did not save you. Pastors are always changing. Preaching styles are always changing. But God's mercy never changes. God's power never changes. His mercy and His power are always here on Sunday in the sermon. You can always come to hear of His love. You can always come to receive His forgiveness for your sins. You can always come and receive comfort and hope for the future. That is what is important. Who it is that is telling you is not important. For it is the message that is important, not the messenger. God help you to focus your attention always on His message of grace and forgiveness and not on the messenger. Amen.