

“WHEN CROSS IS SMART”

I Corinthians 2:1-16

February 5, 2023

18 months ago, I traded in my car for an SUV. I am satisfied with my vehicle. It is comfortable to drive, has plenty of luggage space, and gets good gas mileage that matched my old car. All in all, I have no complaints about the car.

Not only did I get a car, it also came with a **Car App for my smartphone**. The information about my car that can be found on this App is a little intimidating. It can lock and unlock my doors, start the car, and even locate my vehicle. The App tells me how much gas I have in the tank and what my estimated mileage range is. I can call for roadside assistance, get messages from the dealer, prevent a valet from driving my car away, tell if a particular car system needs attention, and even honk the horn, all from a distance. Its rather amazing what is on that car app.

Probably, the feature I like least is the **Driving Score**. That's right, my car is monitoring my driving habits and has the audacity to give me a Score! It makes me feel like I'm taking my driver's test all over. After driving for 46 years without a speeding ticket, I certainly don't need some smart App rating my operation behind the wheel. To tell you the truth most of the time I ignore my **car smart App**, after all, I am the one still driving not it, at least for now.

Our lives are filling up with more and more smart devices that vacuum our rug, tell us needed refrigerator items, start the coffee pot, monitor our heart rate and glucose levels, make perfect rice, turn up the house temperature, and the lights off. We mostly like our smarts, not that they necessarily make us smarter.

The people of Corinth liked smarts too. This Greek port city was wealthy because of its shipping trade and the location of travel. Like many of the Greeks they liked their entertainment of drink, sports, theater, as well as their appreciation for philosophy, great oration, and those who knew how to turn a phrase. Thus, these early Corinthian Christians were struggling with the simplicity of the gospel that the Apostle Paul preached. They liked to think they possessed superior wisdom and intelligence, having special spiritual insight. The Corinthians' egos were getting in the way and causing division in the church. So, Paul, being Paul, writes a letter.

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you with superior speech or wisdom.² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.⁴ My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

Judging from his letters alone, we know Paul was a well-educated man, able to speak different languages, an expert in the Jewish law, and a Roman citizen to boot. We certainly would not call Paul weak or an intellectual slouch. Why this humble approach? Paul is probably making fun of the Corinthians so called wisdom by comparing it to the foolishness of the gospel.

When Paul shared the gospel story with the Corinthians, he did not bring a slick PowerPoint presentation. He did not use words to grab their emotions and manipulate them into believing. He didn't bring a talented dynamic gospel choir. He did not lay out the gospel with logical philosophical arguments, all of which failed Paul in Athens. He simply proclaimed the story of Jesus. WHY?

I. SHARE THE STORY

In Ignatius Spirituality people go on a 30-day Retreat or 30 weeks for those who can't take a month off. The main curriculum for this journey is the **story of Jesus**. One travels through various spiritual stages, or weeks as they call them, reflecting on the life of Jesus. Ignatius wisely understood that everyone was at a different place in their walk with God. There is no one size fits all for discipleship. Instead, Ignatius lets the story and the Holy Spirit speak to the individual while asking, "Where is God in this or how is God speaking to you through this story." The idea is we find ourselves and encounter God in the story. Only God knows that place, and the places in us that hurt, need healing, matured, forgiven, and where we need direction.

Along his travels, I think Paul discovered that you can't really argue someone into the Kingdom of God. Certainly, Paul could make a case for Christ with the best of them, but all the logic in the world doesn't necessarily change a human heart and mind. For that to happen, God must be at work. Paul had learned to share the gospel story and trust God to work in his hearers so they would surrender their lives to Christ. We find ourselves by connecting to the story of Jesus, made real by the Holy Spirit.

II. CROSS IS CENTRAL TO GOSPEL – FAITH.

Once I had a parishioner who was upset because we didn't have a picture of Jesus hanging up in the church. After a second complaint I said, "Fine, I'll get a picture of Jesus up if you can tell me what Jesus looked like." Was Jesus fat, thin, balding, short hair, green eyes, Asian, black skin, beard, or no beard. Perhaps he preferred wearing his carpenter's work pants rather than a robe. Of course, no living person knows what Jesus looked like. The bible is strangely silent on the matter. So how can we put a picture up and claim that is Jesus? That settled the matter.

However, if I had paid a little better attention to Paul's writing, I would have asked this woman to follow me into the sanctuary and pointed at the cross, and said, "**If we want to see a picture of Jesus, it's hanging right there.**" Paul writes, "**For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**" I find it interesting that Paul does not say I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and **HIM RESURRECTED**. His focus is on the crucified Jesus as the central act of God.

Now this doesn't seem like a very smart method of convincing people to follow Jesus. Who wants a Roman torture device to be the symbol of our faith? Kind of gruesome, when you think about it. I've noticed in recent years that few Presbyterians attend a Good Friday Service.

We want to move from Maundy Thursday directly to the joy of resurrection Sunday. My suspicion is, like the sleepy disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, we don't want to share in Christ's suffering. Who wants to watch the naked, broken, bloody, tortured Son of God die? Who wants to look into the suffering, innocent, loving eyes of God on a cross and see our guilt. Who wants to feel the rage of injustice? I'm sure some of the Corinthians saw the cross as an embarrassment to the faith. Our leader, the Son of God died, as a condemned criminal! Let's just skip that part, clean up the faith, and have a more palatable theoretical religion.

You know the Corinthians were right, the cross is an embarrassment, unless Jesus was who he said he was, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God. Then the embarrassment is on us because we killed the source of life and salvation and the bringer of the new age. Paul writes, **"But we speak God's wisdom, a hidden mystery, which God decreed before the ages for our glory and which none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."** In other words, all the wise, knowledgeable, and powerful people of this world were unable to perceive God's will, plans, or work in Jesus, instead they killed the Prince of Peace. So how smart were they? Even with all the information in the world available to us at the touch of a button, have we really become any wiser? Judging by the shootings, hatred, wars, hunger, racism, and in general, how we treat one another, I don't think so. Knowledge does not make one smart.

Paul wrote, ¹⁰**"God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now 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. ¹³And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual."**

The wisdom of God is a cross; in a cross that brings us forgiveness, sets us free, reconciles us to God, draws us to Jesus and shows us how much he loves us. This wisdom comes to us through the Holy Spirit of God and the story of the cross. Make no mistake, that same cross is afront to all the world's definitions of success, materialism, power, knowledge, wisdom, and smart living.

We don't get to Jesus except through the cross and the Holy Spirit. The resurrection did not cancel out the cross. It affirmed what Christ did on the cross, leaving us with a cross bearing model of discipleship. In fact, we embrace the cross when we share this meal, body broken, blood shed.

Every now and then I see a bumper sticker and or a billboard sign that says, **"Jesus is the Answer."** My initial sarcastic reactions is **What's the question?** While there is a certain truth there, we Christians need to be careful not to imply we have all the answers, especially to all the world's problems. We do not and its rather arrogant to claim so. Secondly, the saying is missing the point. The spiritual life is more about **finding meaning** than it is answering

questions, which is how Jesus framed most of his teaching. God is not testing our knowledge, but our character, our loyalty, and our actions. Jesus said I am the Way, not the answer man.

The only way we understand Jesus and the cross is as we live out a cross bearing life. It's a wisdom that comes from dying to self and rising in Christ. Cross is a mystery to power structures of this age, clueless to way God works. It's a wisdom that moves us beyond a survival mentality to the things that really matter, that are eternal. Those mature in faith are not the knowledgeable ones but those who act in love, humility, and unity.

The good news for us today is that the message of Jesus never needs an upgrade. We'll never need to wait in line for the latest version. Instead, the sacrificial death of Jesus is part of the eternal wisdom of God, and his gifts of forgiveness and eternal life are available to everyone who believes.

In a world of smartphones, cars, and gadgets that need regular replacing, God gives us the smart cross which is the hinge-point of history. It points to Jesus Christ, crucified and raised. It reminds us that forgiveness is in the blood of Christ. It is an unmistakable symbol of incredible sacrificial love. So go ahead and delete those unwanted apps, if you need to. But hang on to Jesus Christ, the eternal wisdom of God, revealed to us through the story, the cross, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley
Sunday, February 5, 2023
Second Scripture Lesson

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

2When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

⁶Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. ⁷But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"— ¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now 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. ¹³And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. ¹⁶"For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.