

Sermon: Taking Paul Seriously (and literally)

Year A, the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37](#)

Offered February 16, 2020 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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How do we know life changing words when we hear them? I've been thinking a lot this week, about Miss Philbin and the glasses and the lunch box.¹ I bet she said something like that to hundreds of kids. But it hit me like an asteroid. And if you think of what she taught me, and 3rd grade is an important year, where you're making the transition into learning how to learn, she must have taught me a ton. I know she taught me cursive and I use that every day. But the glasses and the lunch box. For me, that was life changing.

Some of the members of *the church of God that is in Corinth* (1 Corinthians 1:2) were angry with Paul. He had knowledge of God that he hadn't shared with them, they felt. There was life changing knowledge that he had and he hadn't shared it with them.² Apollos had shared. And now they were on Team Apollos and anyone who wanted to belong to the church in Corinth had to be on Team Apollos.

Having just been through the first in the nation presidential primary, we can have some empathy for people wanting to belong, wanting to be on a team. Whatever your party or candidate, even if you don't put out a yard sign or wear a hat or knock on doors, there is a moment where you stand in front of that ballot and you pick a team. Or you don't stand in front of any ballot and you pick to be on the-not-standing-in-front-of-a-ballot team. Because there's no way to miss the primary in New Hampshire.

Part of why we pick a team is that we're hurt, we're injured in some way. Our team understands the injury and maybe has a way of healing it or maybe just acknowledges it. So the gardeners know how healing time with your hands in the soil can be. Cooks know how healing the alchemy of spices and a slow simmer can be. And even if there is no way to heal centuries of racism or the sharp decline in manufacturing jobs, it's nice to be with other people who understand how tough that reality is. So we group together. We get that. That seems pretty human.

When Team Apollos gets up in Paul's face about withholding information, he comes right back at them. They weren't ready for what he knew. Even now, they are toddlers who want to drive the car. What is Paul expecting? What is Paul looking for and not seeing? He calls them "people of the flesh." Standing on our side of church history, we might hear some kind of coded message: the body is bad, sinful, dirty. Physical desires lead us terribly astray. We're still working our way out of that hole. Because that's not what Paul is saying. When he uses the word "flesh," he just means "regular old human."³

Paul's talking about someone who is driven by the concerns of life in this world, about getting along with their neighbors, having a nice life, with plenty of financial resources and a reasonably happy family, good health, a glass of wine on the weekend. Basically, having enough power that your life isn't disrupted by other people's business. And we can understand that too. It seems pretty human. Because it is.

¹ Referring to the Children's Message earlier in the service.

² J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Commentary on the Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9" from "Lectionary Commentaries for February 13, 2011: Sixth Sunday after Epiphany", Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=184&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed October 10, 2019).

³ Beverly Gaventa, "Sixth Sunday after Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 142.

And that's Paul's point. When Paul came to them in Corinth, he *did not come proclaiming the mystery of God ... in lofty words or wisdom* (1 Corinthians 2:1). He shared *nothing among them except Jesus Christ, and him crucified* (1 Corinthians 2:2). That was the milk (1 Corinthians 3:2), that was the baby formula, he offered. He wanted to see if the Corinthians would begin to grow on that food. In his opinion, so far they haven't.

The *church of God that is in Corinth* hasn't gotten that basic message, because they're still the same regular old humans they were when Paul met them. There's no point in sharing more knowledge because they're still "fleshy".⁴ They're acting as though Christ has not changed them at all.⁵ They are still acting as though the good life that the world promotes should define the church.⁶ They have failed to realize how the gospel of the cross has brought a new creation.⁷

Someone "fleshy", a regular old human, will hear today's reading from Deuteronomy *but if your heart turns away [from God] and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish* (Deuteronomy 30:17-18) and think "No thanks. I don't need another person telling me I failed." Someone "spiritual", someone who has allowed Jesus to change them, hears *choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days* (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) and think "Phew. Life is so much more than the good life and I get to enjoy that just by being like Jesus." The fleshy person doesn't want to be reminded that they will perish. The spiritual person is ok with the reminder because they're comfortable that this life is not all that there is. The fleshy person doesn't want to hear that there's a choice. The spiritual person is so grateful that God gave them a choice and the knowledge and skills to make it as well as the time to live into it.

What Paul is seeing in *the church of God that is in Corinth* is jealousy and quarrelling (1 Corinthians 3:3). If Paul is looking for signs of a spiritual people, he's looking for signs that they have become more like Jesus Christ and him crucified. Paul doesn't expect them to be unwounded, to not be broken and hurting. There's no way to live in this world without being deeply damaged and alienated. The answer that Paul gave to the people of Corinth is Jesus Christ and him crucified. Jesus who identifies with our loneliness, who carries our wounds, all in order to show us the God who loves us.⁸ In Christ alone can we belong.⁹ In Christ alone we grow into the discovery that we are loved.¹⁰

So, ok, the church of God that is in Brookline, how do *we* hear Paul's message? I think most of us have allowed Jesus to change our lives. Most of us are living into the reality that we are loved, not just for this life, but for all eternity. It transforms us. It gives us great relief that life is more than what this world has to offer. We're grateful that God gave us a choice and we have the knowledge and skills to make that choice and the time to live into it. And if that is more or less true, do we keep that to ourselves?

⁴ Brian Peterson, "Commentary on the Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9" from "Lectionary Commentaries for February 16, 2014: Sixth Sunday after Epiphany", Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=459&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed October 10, 2019).

⁵ Peterson.

⁶ Peterson.

⁷ Peterson.

⁸ Roger J. Gench, "Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Pastoral Perspective, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 352.

⁹ Gench, 352.

¹⁰ Gench, 352.

And this is where every single one of us is cringing, because we know what's coming next. We go out into the world and we say, "Listen up. You got two choices. *God has set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity* (Deuteronomy 30:15). I've chosen life and prosperity and if you don't choose a life changed by God, you are actively choosing death and adversity. So I expect to see you at the church at 10:00am on Sunday. And bring a plate of cookies for coffee hour." Because that will *definitely* spread the knowledge of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

So let's take Paul seriously and, well, let's take him literally. Be like Christ. I think that means listening way before speaking. I know we focus on the parts of the Bible where Jesus speaks. But on most of those occasions, he listens first. He might heal and then preach. He might be questioned and then respond. He might have someone ask a personal question. But pretty much, when we see Jesus in action, when we hear his words, he listens first.

So who have we not listened to in our community? I mean really listened to. Not to find a phrase or two that will allow us to speak. But really listened to. Have we listened to the Seniors at the Senior Luncheon? Have we listened to the PTO or the Community Emergency Response Team? Have we listened to the folks who walk their dogs at 7:00pm at night? Have we listened to the folks who come to AA? Have we listened to the folks who haven't yet come to AA? And when we go to a Lions meeting or a Rotary meeting and feel like a fish out of water, do we think about the people in the Church of God that is in Brookline and try to imagine who could come to that meeting and really hear them?

I think we're anxious about sharing that we're people of faith. I joined a book group at the library in Andover that meets on Monday morning. Everyone else in the group is either a stay at home parent or retired. When I answered their question about what I did, you could just see the bristles going up. It was like being in a room full of puffer fish. So believe me, I get it.

But if Jesus is life changing for you, perhaps it is because someone listened to you in his name. A parent or a Sunday School teacher or a minister or a neighbor. Someone set aside their fleshy drive for the good life and just wanted to hear about your wounds, about your injuries. Sometimes, just having someone acknowledge that what everyone calls the good life isn't good for you can be healing. Let's stop worrying about what we have to say about our faith and focus on how we're going to listen. How we're going to listen to seniors who are having a great time in retirement and those who are facing terrifying medical bills. How we're going to listen to young parents who have managed to drag themselves and their cub scouts to church and are hoping that no one gets impaled on a flag. How we're going to listen to third graders who are beginning to long for more independence in how they learn. Life changes when you are truly listened to.

If we want to share the life changing knowledge of Jesus Christ and him crucified, then first we need to get much better at listening. Amen.