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Corinthians 2:1-12

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SNOW DAYS, PLUMBING, FACEBOOK AND JESUS

Dear Lord,

I appreciate your moments of insight...your little glimpses of something profound that you give to me from time to time. I like having epiphanies. I have one request. When you send me the white-hot center of a sermon, could you maybe have a better sense of timing? In the car on the way to church on Sunday morning is a little too close to the edge for me. Just a request. Amen.

I had planned to preach on this last week - the snowpocalypse...my family having the flu and sinus infections (or both), frozen pipes and other plumbing joys and the relentless task of trying to keep two boys entertained in the house without resorting to 8 hours of TV. I had these great lines - little darlings my preaching professor calls them - that I really wanted to use. They were so witty and clever.

Then I listened to "On Being" the NPR program featuring Krista Tippett, daughter of our own Charlotte Lankard, who interviews with great skill the most interesting people you can imagine. This morning was the writer, poet and columnist Terry Tempest Williams. They talked about a wide range of things, but the closing conversation made me realize that my sermon was going to change.

See I had been in this dilemma all week. My normal routine busted into pieces, I was scrambling to find something for this very moment. I was too busy being dad, husband, nurse, plumber, dog wrangler, kid manager and snow shoveler to worry about a sermon. So, by Thursday with absolutely nothing in the tank, I did what any good 21st century preacher would do - I asked for help on Facebook. I got some good ideas. Just talk about Jesus. Love is always a good topic. Talk about adversity, given that I also shared my travails with the Facebook community. Preach about the fact that we are not used to seeing God's graces in the form of the trials we face.

Every problem is a possibility. Preach about endurance, or how life is 10% what happens and 90% what you make of it.

It was all good advice. And I felt support from that community of friends, many of whom are standing in a pulpit today trying to say something meaningful. Good words. Good ideas. Until about 7:45 this morning. I had a problem – one that I even thought I had solved.

Which brings me to Paul. I think that's what Paul wanted to do – solve a problem. Of course his problem wasn't as basic as a frozen pipe. The illness he was addressing wasn't going to run its course, so he couldn't just tell the Corinthians to drink lots of fluids and rest. Chicken soup wasn't going to make a dent in this problem. Paul was talking about the pretty existential basics here. Paul was trying to get across very basic ideas about what constitutes a life well lived...about what leads to wholeness...and he was up against some pretty stiff competition. In this letter, Paul is talking to some people who don't exactly reside in the high-rent district. In the passage right before this he says, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." This church in Corinth was made up of the same people to whom Jesus preached – those on the receiving end of the empire. The status quo worked on them, not for them. So the choice in trying to give these people hope was to show them the path of empire and see if that worked out for them, or to show them the path that Jesus demonstrated.

Think of it this way. Paul is trying to convey a message of peace, justice and sacrificial love to a culture awash in the hierarchy of status, the huge gap between wealthy and poor and the injustice of money and power ruling any and all decisions, including your value as a human being.

And that's where the problem is. Yes, you can lay out the mystery of God as revealed in Jesus, but it flies against everything else in the world. It's hard to combat that with only words. Every other message that Corinthians heard would run counter to the gospel. The impression of the letter is that the Corinthians are looking for an easy answer like the empire gives them. Even if they don't like it, it is clear. But Paul isn't giving them a simple formula. This is complex and hard to decipher stuff. It's like water trying to flow through a frozen pipe...you might get a trickle if you're very lucky. And in this passage you hear this radical and amazing thing...a very humbling thing too, to a preacher. "When I came to you, brothers and sisters", Paul says, "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

Terry Tempest Williams tells this story about her mom's death:

- Mom (center of her life) dying – scratch her back
- I want you to have my journals, but don't read them until I am gone
- Mom dies – a month later her brothers and father have gone, she decides to read
 - Finds journals in exact spot her mom told her
 - All hand bound, covered in cloth of various types (denim, cotton, all colors and patterns)
 - All empty, not a word in them

When Krista asks her in amazement what she thinks that meant, Williams says, “I have no idea. The most I've come to is a new interest in what constitutes voice...how does someone have or use their voice?” What I think is that she is responding like Paul would have advised. With fear and trembling and looking deeply into something that seems foolish, even disappointing. This was Paul's argument – the cross is foolishness to so many, but to us it is the power and wisdom of God. It is an empty page where we were expecting easily digestible answers. For the benefit is not in the answer, Paul would have us see, but in the question.

Paul is telling the Corinthians that they are going to have to open up their hearts and minds to some different ways of being in the world. He makes a constant comparison between the world's wisdom and the wisdom of God. God's way is not so obvious. It takes time. As New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says, " It is better to speak of 'learning Jesus,' rather than of 'knowing Jesus,' because we are concerned with a process rather than a product." God is not typically revealed in a moment of profound rhetoric, as much as I don't like to admit that. God's wisdom comes to us in our learning which, like any human relationship, takes trust, attentiveness, grace, creativity, hope and patience. Those are the things which we must practice, because they enable our ability to learn Christ. Johnson says that this is "something that doesn't happen all at once, but can only grow over the course of time. Unlike the study of a merely historical figure, which comes to a resolution once all the evidence has been amassed and analyzed, our learning of Jesus continues over time as we engage the Spirit of the risen Lord at every moment." Often times my most profound moments of redemption or revelation come years after the event, after lots of suffering and frustration, and only when I was ready to see them.

What is expected of us is not knowing the answers, it is being in relationship. In relationship with one another, in touch with the world around us and in connection with God through the mysterious work of the Spirit. That's the thing I forget more often than anything. It means not having certainty, as if we could own or possess the nature of God, but living in each and every moment knowing that comprehension is not the goal. Jesus is recorded in the gospel stories as having told

his disciples that they must take up their cross daily to be his followers. This is what Paul, I think, is saying also. Paul tells the Corinthians that he has come in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, not as some sort of sado-masochistic homage to suffering, but because the only way that we have to experience God is by being the most human we can be, and that includes our times of pain, frustration, fear and failure. It's as much a part of us becoming whole as our moments of joy and understanding and peace. That's why Paul told another church, the one in Philippi, that in his absence they should work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. We do not rest satisfied with the knowledge of God that was ours as children, or the knowledge that was ours yesterday. For God calls us out of our comfort zones towards a place that is more fulfilling and also more frightening. That is the path...the practice, suffering, frustration and all, that lies before us as followers of a risen Christ. Though it can be hard to see sometimes, it is all we really need. Well, that and a good plumber.

Let us pray-

God of unrealized wisdom,

Lodged in our false sense of certainty, it may seem like we have it all under control. But it doesn't take much for that house of cards to come crashing down. Maybe it seems foolish, but we hear your voice asking us to pay attention to that. Maybe we're headed down the wrong road, this road of gaining control. Maybe we'd be better off headed to your table...the one where wisdom is slowly uncovered, where up is down and where the economy of our lives is turned completely around. For we do not comprehend you - we feel you, like the wind on our faces or the breath of a newborn child against our cheek. Let us be open to feeling your presence, whenever and wherever.

AMEN.

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