

## **"THE POSSIBILITY IN FAITH" -- a communion sermon by Gary R. Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:1-13.**

*Text: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." --v 9*

One of the most eloquent passages in Scripture has to be today's text especially as it is translated in traditional King James English: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."

Paul wrote this passage and the letter in which it is contained, to the Christians of Corinth, a Greek city-state located on an Isthmus that separates the Ionian and Aegean Seas. In Paul's day Corinth was a sprawling city of the Roman Empire bursting with trade and commerce, citizens and soldiers, transients and migrants bringing their cosmopolitan influence.

Like many cities in America, like Los Angeles and Pomona and, yes, Upland, it had its measure of crime, promiscuity and temptation. Like our own community there were rich and poor, illiterate and educated; pleasure-seeking hedonists and self-denying ascetics and people of a great many religious persuasions which ran the gamut from rational to mystical, deeply stoical to highly emotional. And like the culture in which we live, Corinth was, if not hostile, at least not healthful or conducive to the faith of struggling Christians who lived there. And so the challenge for Paul was like the challenge facing modern Christian preachers and parents, teachers and leaders: how to help Christians to cope in a hostile culture and how can you make Christ believable to others? Our passage suggests several ways.

**First, we must encourage people to share their faith.** Man, have I changed in the 36 years I have been in the ministry, but then, the culture has also! When I started in ministry in a small, farm town in the mid-west almost everyone when to church and Christianity was the norm. I figured you did not have to say a whole lot about Christ because he was known and understood. I might have been wrong, even then, but for sure, that idea is no longer valid. I think it is imperative that Christians, in an alien culture, know what they believe and be able to articulate their faith to themselves and to others.

The early church called this the *kerygma*—a New Testament Greek word that means "to proclaim". We are called to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The *kerygma* is what Paul has in mind when he writes, "I decided to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified." He told the message plainly and without fancy phrases or appealing thoughts.

How might we say the *kerygma* today? What are the basic facts of our faith? Let me

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put it to you very, very starkly. If your dying brother or sister or best friend said, “I don’t want to die without knowing Jesus, tell me what to believe, help me to become a believer” – what would you say to that person, how would you say it?

Forty years ago my friend Bill Martin and I would go around and around on this subject trying to say in a few words what it means to be a Christian. I can tell you what I believe in four little sentences, here goes...”Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He died on the cross for your sins and mine. If we accept him on faith as our Lord and Savior we will have salvation. The Bible contains all the necessary and essential knowledge we need for our faith.”

Now let’s say, for the sake of discussion, that four sentences are too long to remember. Could you say it more succinctly? Yes! Remember the symbol of the fish? Some Christians put that symbol on their car or wear it as jewelry. The fish is an acrostic symbol. In the original Greek each letter stood for a Greek word that spelled the word “Ichthus” which means fish in Greek. In English they spell out a kerygmatic phrase: “Jesus Christ, God’s son, saves.” Jesus Christ is the son of God and by him we are saved.

If that’s too long I can give you what I think is the Guinness Book of Records shortest kerygmatic statement. Are you ready? “Jesus is Lord.” That’s it! It’s that simple but that deep. Jesus is Lord. He is my Lord. He wants to be your Lord. He will bless your life as he has blessed mine if he is your Lord and you and I should not be ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for it is the power for salvation and something I hope each one of us can articulate in our lives and to others.

Paul knew Jesus and he had the courage to tell others about him. But I fear that many of us do not know what we believe or we know but we do not share it. By this I am not suggesting that we should pass out tracts this morning and proceed to witness this afternoon at Venice Beach. I am glad some people are called to that kind of ministry but I am not one. But in your own way, in your own time, in the leading of the Spirit, each of us should be able to share our faith with those persons whom God has given us to show the way to Jesus Christ.

We need to know what we believe—the basics of the faith. And it is important to share our faith with others. That’s the *kerygma*--the basic proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. The *kerygma* is a great beginning but it doesn't end there. Christians have a desire to know more and the Corinthians were no exception, they were asking for deeper understanding. They already knew Jesus as their Lord; not they were wanting to refine their faith. And so a second step is needed.

**Here then is the second step: to move from *kerygma*, the proclamation, to *didache*, the teachings which lead to understanding.** This is both important and necessary because we must move from spiritual milk to the meat of the gospel, from

its first simple truths to its powerful way of impacting every corner of our lives. But it is here that a lot of people go wrong. Before really knowing what they believe they

chase after other philosophies.

It bothered Paul to see this happening in Corinth. Many of the church members were trying to blend Christianity with Oriental and Greco-Roman religions. The result was that they either watered down their own faith or they jumped track altogether.

Those who flirt with other beliefs often go in one of two directions: they lose their faith in doubt or they become arrogant about what they know. Such was the case of a professor I had in college. A brilliant philosopher, his only problem was that he became so sophisticated that he scoffed at everyone else's beliefs. He was a "Doubting Thomas" who would have to see the wounds before believing. The only trouble is that he became so prideful in his skepticism that even the wounds of Christ would not have moved him!

If I wanted to know the truths of the Christian faith I would begin by doing serious reading of the Bible. I would not want to read "about" the Bible, I would want to read the Bible. And I would want to study the Bible with other Christian friends and discuss passages and thoughts and insights with other fellow travelers. Then I would want to spend time talking to God (praying), worshipping God (alone and with others in church or in small groups), fellowshiping with other believers, and finding ways to serve God by serving others. This would lead me further into the faith. It starts with kerygma, it moves into didache and then it starts to bless every part of our being and that gets at the verse for today.

There is a secret wisdom of God which is hidden from the haughty and arrogant of this world. It is known only to those quiet believers who practice their faith on a daily basis. It comes to those who have receptive hearts and a willingness to be open to the leading of God's spirit. It is something beyond the senses--beyond what the ears hear and the eyes see; nor is it a matter of the heart or mind. **This then is the third step, the assimilation of faith into our very beings; it is what Paul calls the *musterion*.** The *musterion* is more than knowing the basics--more than understanding them. This third step is a matter of surrendering to God, living in and for God, walking in step with God. This step opens the door of possibility faith--believing deep within that "you can do all things in Christ who strengthens you." (Phil. 4:13) It is here that we begin to understand our text in its depths:

"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."

To be alive to the revelation of God's spirit is to be thrown into a kind of free existence in which one is readied for the excitement God has prepared. It usually involves transformation; it makes us into new beings. An unstable Peter is transformed into a solid rock of faith; the hateful Paul becomes the lover and protector of the early church; an irresponsible Augustine is converted into a great Bishop who shapes the theology of the entire Middle Ages. John Wesley is transformed into a blazing brand that moves through a dark period of English history like a lighted torch. Perhaps the world has yet to see what God can do through a

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band of people, or even through the life of one person, like you, who is utterly devoted to God. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."

The theologian Emil Brunner called faith the "impossible possibility." God makes things possible and helps people do the otherwise impossible. That is one of the glorious things about the Christian faith and it is so exciting because, around every corner, there is the possibility that God will put someone or some situation in your path that you can serve God and bless God and know, deep within, that you are his person and doing his will. I confess to you I would be lost without that sense of purpose in my life.

A person who studies the future recently said that of the estimates that scientists make of the future, 7 out of 8 are received with pessimism and dismay. Indeed many of us seem afraid of what the future holds--especially in these difficult social and economic times. But it need not be! Ours is a possibility faith. God makes the impossible happen! Our job is to keep the lines of communication open to God so that we do not get distracted by the "wisdom of this age" or the "spirit of this world" or by mere human understanding.

Moreover, we have great spiritual resources available to us in this church—fellowship, worship, sacraments, Bible studies, opportunities for service, mission projects, and countless ways to bless and be blessed in our walk.

Paul reminds us in the closing words of our passage that "we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts he bestows upon us."

Faith's possibility: it is within the reach of all who have heard the Gospel with an understanding and seeking heart, to all who are open to the beckoning of the Spirit, to all who seek to live for him. We need not abhor the past nor dread the future for ours is a God of endless possibility!

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