

A Sermon on Preaching for the Season of Epiphany

1 Cor 1:10-21

The lectionary committee, the people who cut up the texts, don't do it very well at times. That's not entirely their fault. The original texts had no spaces between the letters, no divisions between the sentences. The letters are all in upper case (capital letters). Although there were some general sections, and there was a way of indicating a question, it was quite different from the way it's laid out for us in chapters and verses and paragraphs.

The lectionary committee used to stop this text at verse 16 or 17 but, for us, the natural break occurs at verse 21. What Paul is doing in this section is talking about the quarreling, the fighting that is going on in Corinth. He talks about those who say they belong to Paul, and those who belong to Apollos, and those who belong to Cephas, and those who belong to Christ. It had become a matter of personalities. Paul had to deal with that throughout his career because it had become evident that he wasn't an imposing person.

It seems he might have been an epileptic, or he might have stuttered, or he might have had really bad eyesight. But he surely wasn't an imposing speaker and an imposing personality. He was attacked not only here but elsewhere. In 2 Cor 10 through 13 he writes that others accused him saying: "You haven't really suffered; you haven't had enough troubles." So in 2 Cor 12:1-13 there is a long list of all the things that you and I would call a kind of martyrdom. His accusers said: "You don't know how to do miracles!" Paul responds: "I did more miracles than you did." But, he adds: "All of that is irrelevant. What's relevant is Christ proclaimed." That takes it out of the arena of personalities.

1 Corinthians 1:17 reads: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." (John 4:2 says that Jesus never baptized anyone.)

Every congregation wants a good preacher. People go church shopping and preacher shopping. Where is someone who is interesting and stimulating? Someone who tells jokes. It's got to be interesting! It's tempting for the preacher to be interesting and even entertaining, but as Paul says, then "the cross of Christ is emptied of its power."

It's really tempting to make the whole business into a cult of personality. To be showy and dramatic. The problem is that then it is the show and not the gospel.

It's also tempting to turn the preaching into teaching. To be sure, it's not bad to have information, and one needs to know something. But it's a real temptation to turn the sermon into a lesson or a lecture. That's not what it is.

It's even more tempting to think the purpose of the sermon is to convince and persuade. It's tempting to think it's the pastor's job to persuade you by argument or emotion so that

you are convinced and you get on board. When this happens, the Evil One then has us both because that's not the task of preaching.

In 1 Cor 9:16 Paul writes: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" The test of what it's about is whether the gospel is preached. It's not whether it's interesting or not interesting."

What would happen if we had groups that met after Sunday services to discuss: Was the gospel preached today? We as Protestants ask that question.

We don't ask: What did the Pope tell us? We don't ask: What did the bishops say? We don't say whatever the preacher said was right because that person was ordained. Ordination does not give the preacher special grace. No. The question is: Was the gospel preached? We hope the person who has been trained in seminary will know more about the gospel to help us. That's what makes the difference.

On the mission field sometimes very minimally trained people go out and preach very simply saying: "God sent his Son in Jesus Christ and loved us enough to die for us and save us." Minimal, yes, but good because the message is not mixed up with something else.

We, clergy as well as the congregations, get mixed up thinking the sermon must be convincing and interesting. Does it make us really feel the gospel? Does it grab us?

Or perhaps we dismiss what is said as just that preacher's opinion. The next preacher down the road has a different opinion.

That's all irrelevant because the only question is: Was the gospel preached?

Why is that important? Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:17: "The Word of the cross is the power of salvation." It not only says: "lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power," but also in verse 18: "The Word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God."

What's at stake is salvation. Romans 1:16: "The gospel is the power of God for salvation." In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul is more specific: "The Word of the cross . . . is the power of God (for salvation)."

The question is: Is that Word preached in our generation, among us? Or has that Word been changed or altered by adding something to it? Have we fallen for a "gospel-plus" message? A "gospel-plus" message such as: The gospel plus your decision for Jesus, the gospel plus a preferential option for the poor, or the gospel plus a pastor/priest with special grace, the gospel plus some good works. Whenever something more is required, the one true gospel is corrupted, distorted (Augsburg Confession 7). And people are led astray.

The Word of the cross is the power of God. That's serious business. That's different from thinking: Oh it really doesn't matter what is preached, or if the church mixes the gospel with other causes, other agendas. That it's no big deal. It's more than a big deal. Salvation is at stake. Because only the Word of the cross is the power of God for salvation.

This raises all kinds of problems for us in our culture because we think: "Well, it should just depend on how you feel about it, and how it works for you, and the answer is: No. The truth of the gospel is a matter of salvation. And it doesn't have to do with personalities or power of any other kind.

How does that come to you and me? Paul writes in Rom 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ."

We can almost immediately go wrong by thinking: "Since faith comes by hearing, and God is everywhere, then I can hear his voice in the sounds of nature as I talk a walk or as I listen to lovely music." But no. The promises of God are only in the preaching of Christ.

Faith comes by hearing, and the hearing comes by the proclamation of Christ. By the doing of it. That's why we always come back to infant baptism. That little one doesn't know anything. Doesn't decide anything. As Luther writes in the Large Catechism:

"We are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends upon the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that baptism is simply water and God's Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water, baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word." (Large Catechism, 4:52-53; Tappert 443; Kolb/Wengert 463).

When someone asks: What is the Word of God and how does it work? We point to infant baptism; it is the perfect example of the Word of God at work.

There is something important about bringing children to church. The Word of God is coming to them as well as to us. Some worry: Why are they here? They can't understand. But the foolishness of the Word of the cross is not understood by older people either. The preaching produces faith. The preaching of Christ.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well: "Whoever drinks of the water I shall give him will never thirst; the water I shall give him will become in him a spring of living water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). We need this water given in baptism because it doesn't have to do with our feeling, our understanding, our liking it, or our liking the preacher. It's in the doing of it that God works.

Just as we don't want to be deprived of water in our daily life, so in church we do not deprive ourselves or anyone of the water of eternal life, thus endangering their salvation and ours because this is how God works, through the preaching of the Word and the giving of the sacraments.

The Evil One is always trying to sidetrack us into thinking we don't need to go to church. We are in good shape. Don't need it. Heard it all before. We have positive ideas about God.

All of that is irrelevant because what's important is that God can reach you and be effective through the preaching of the gospel. It doesn't depend on the preacher; it depends on the gospel. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:21: "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." Amen