

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
"Claiming Our Identity: A Wisdom Church"
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Proverbs 2:1-6; 1 Corinthians 2: 1-13

God's wisdom verses human wisdom. That is the battle playing out in this letter from Paul to the Corinthian church. If Paul sounds defensive in the beginning of this, it's because he is. His whole ministry Paul has been compared with the likes of Plato and Aristotle. When Paul was teaching, Greek Philosophy was all the rage. The lofty arguments and eloquent debates were what people were most interested in hearing. When Paul comes into town and speaks plainly about Christ he always hears the same complaint. "Sounds interesting and nice but it's not as useful as Aristoteles History of Animals." Paul gets to a point where he has had it. He studies up on the rhetoric and philosophies and heads to Athens to prove once and for all that Christ crucified can stand alongside any Greek philosophy. He fails....pretty miserably in fact.

As he retreats from Athens with his tail between his legs he writes this letter to the Corinthians. You can hear in these verses the assurances he must be telling himself to feel better. Who needs lofty words or human wisdom, I have the power of God! I don't need to know the theories of Plato or Socrates, I know Christ crucified! Paul knows he will still have to face the comparison with Greek philosophers, so he sends this message ahead of him to prime the Corinthians to hearing his words not in the shadow of Greek philosophy but in the light of God's glory.

Paul argues that by him not using big words he is worthier of being heard. Big words distract from the message, but Paul chooses to use simple words so the message shines through the rhetoric. Paul knew the message of Christ very well. His sermons were the reason churches were taking off all over the Roman empire. The failure in Athens was just one overshadowed by many success stories. He is not the confident, eloquent, philosophical genius everyone would love him to be, but because he is not those things when people believe his message it is not because of him that that believe it is because of God working in their heart.

That is the essential difference Paul wants the Corinthians to understand. Human wisdom must be imparted eloquently and understood completely to be gained. But God's wisdom can only be understood when we get our hearts involved in the learning. There were always two kinds of people in the crowd when Paul preached. Those who heard Paul's sermons and walk away, and those who were moved to make drastic life changes and commitments. How does that work? How do the same words impact people differently? Human wisdom would say that's not possible. Human wisdom would argue that if two people heard the same lesson, were equally intelligent, were similar is just about every way, they should learn the same thing, but that's not what happens when people hear about Jesus.

There is something about God's wisdom that, as Paul puts it, is secret and hidden. To accept God's wisdom, we also must accept the mystery of it. Accepting mystery is not something the world trains us well to do. Learning concrete facts that one can describe, that is true for everyone, we know how to do that. It's essentially what all schools and universities do, but that is human wisdom. Paul wants us to see the value in what we cannot possibly describe. The things no human has ever seen or heard. Human wisdom is taught through the ear and eye, but the spirit teaches through the heart.

Every one of us has experienced something we can not describe. Some may categorize it as supernatural. You saw or felt something indescribable. Maybe you made a decision based on a gut instinct. You could never describe what made you pick one option over the other, you just had a sense that it was right. Or maybe you have experienced love. You've loved someone or been loved despite flaws and shortcomings. Love makes no human sense! If human wisdom could figure out love, there wouldn't be hundreds of different dating apps on the market. Sure, science can show how

endorphins affect our brains and how certain faces make us release more endorphins but there is a limit to the what human wisdom can explain.

Take music for example. Science can explain how sound is made. Sound is made by vibrations. We can explain that the vibrations an object makes produces longitudinal waves that begin to vibrate the air around the object and that wave vibration travels through the air until it hits our ears. Our ears are designed to take in those vibrations and signal the brain that there is a sound. I could go on and tell you how our ears hear sound, how our brain interprets sound, that is all human wisdom and you can google it if you want more information.

After receiving those waves, sound does this thing in human brains that human wisdom does not understand. Our brains can understand music. Years of research has found that we are the only animals that can put rhythm, tambour, and pitch together. Other animals can beat out a rhythm or hear a pitch and answer to it. Only human brains can decipher music from a noisy construction site. What is even more of a mystery is how music can affect our feelings. How many of you have cried when hearing a song? Or could not help yourself but to stand up and dance to a song? Human wisdom has no clue why that is.

If Andrew plays a major scale (plays major scale) we generally feel happier than if he were to play a minor scale (plays minor scale). There are all sorts of theories out there about why major makes us feel happy and minor makes us feel sad. Most of them talk about brightness and a sense of wholeness and resolution of major scales. However, major is not universally a happy sound to humans. In Indonesia, major scales sound sad and minor scales sound happy. Physically we hear sound the same but something in our heart learns to respond differently. Human wisdom can explain the physical but gets tripped up when the heart and our feelings get involved.

Paul says that's because the heart is God's classroom. The spirit of God teaches from the inside out. If we have taken the spirit of God to be our guide, then when human wisdom fails the spirit steps in to fill in the gap. Even though it is a mystery we are more than happy to accept the effect on our feelings as real and true. No one asks what made you get up and dance, it's acceptable to just dance when there is music around.

A few years ago, this church sent a mission team to Kenya. One day we met girls, young girls. Who left their families and walked, sometimes ran, for days to escape female genital mutilation. Most of these girls were the first in their tribe to ever say no to this ancient tradition. Imagine one day becoming convinced that eating apples was wrong. You come to this conclusion even though every other person you have ever met eats apples. You believe this despite everyone around you saying it is the most healthy and safe thing you could do. In fact, it is such an honor to eat an apple they hold a party the first time you have one. But right before your party you decide you don't want to. You get death threats; your parents say they will hold you down and force the apple on you. Your only choice is to eat the apple or run away. Running away means you are on your own, as a young child you have very little opportunities to support yourself and it most likely will be worse than just eating the apple. Despite all this something inside you tells you to go. So, you do.

Thankfully on their escape these girls heard about a rescue and are now receiving an education and growing into amazing women. When we asked them, what made them decide to leave they had no answer. How does a person come to that conclusion?

When I asked again privately for one of the girls to tell me who inspired her to run away, she simply looked up at me and said the Holy Spirit did. It was not her own courage or someone else's words that told her to leave. The glory of her escape goes fully to God. The world may not like her answer. The world will want to explain it away in one way or another. The world will want proof of the Spirit's influence. What more proof do you need of God's wisdom than a changed life.

Paul says wisdom is taught to the mature. Those who are listening and open to hear. A wisdom that is beyond today's knowledge, a wisdom no human has seen or heard or can even comprehend. That makes this wisdom hard to describe and explain. These are the things the Spirit teaches us from within.

It's uncomfortable to know something but not understand it. The world will always be suspicious of such wisdom. We will forever be asked to explain it. Why did you leave? What made you choose this over that? How could you believe that? When we can't explain ourselves we feel silly, inadequate, even stupid for feeling so strongly about something we can't describe. But that insecurity is what makes us the best advocates for God. It means our success, our changed life, is not because we are the smartest, or that we trained the hardest. All the credit goes to the Spirit who inspires our hearts to action.

Embrace the mystery. Do not let the fear or trembling deter you from showing the world how God's wisdom has changed your life. When asked How or Why or What answer as simply as you can and when you can't describe something answer like that Kenyan girl "the Holy Spirit did" AMEN