

I CORINTHIANS 16:1-24  
REVIEW  
March 25, 2010

My small group leader, Joyce Vogt, asked us to go through the book of I Corinthians, and choose a favorite verse from each chapter. This book is full of choice nuggets, and it was easy for me to find at least one gem in each chapter! I hoped, as I wrote down my choices, that I wasn't just completing an assignment, but that I was reflecting on verses that were becoming a part of me, and changing me into the kind of Christian Paul describes in chapter 13. There is an old saying, "Stay with the word (small w) until the Word (big W) breaks through." Aren't we really hoping to encounter Christ in a new way, every time we open the bible, or hear a sermon based on scripture, or listen to a broadcast or even listen to Christian music? At one level, if we're honest, aren't we sometimes disappointed, wondering if we are growing in the image of Christ, or are any closer to Him than we were at the beginning of the study? Why are we spending all this time studying the bible? My husband puts this with a more secular turn of phrase. "So what, now what"?

One of the things that we learned in studying about Corinth is that it is similar in many ways to Indianapolis, Indiana. We are living in a very

permissive society, much like Corinth, - but because of our technology, the darker sides of society are available right in our living rooms, and even scarier, in our children's bedrooms through their computers, cell phones, and TV's. We live with divisions in our churches and homes. We live in a time of law suits, and people demanding their rights. Paul probably couldn't have conceived of anything like the Jerry Springer show, but those Corinthians were attacking each other, and pointing fingers at each other, and using their freedoms in Christ to become stumbling blocks to each other. Many of the Corinthians knew the scriptures, but their lives weren't reflecting either their knowledge of the Old Testament books, or their new teachings about Jesus Christ. The goal of our meditating on scripture is to encounter a Living Person who will come into our lives, and eventually lead us to where the love of God will become something flowing through our whole bodies rather than just a hopeful thought in our heads. We are not studying scripture just for information.

In the beginning of this book, in Chapter 1, v.22, Paul says that the Jews that Paul was preaching to demanded miraculous signs, that the Greeks, or gentiles were looking for words of great wisdom, but that wasn't what he preached. He preached only the crucified and risen Christ, and

that he realized that this was a stumbling block to Jews and gentiles alike. Then he says that the foolishness of God ( and many of his listeners found it foolishness), is wiser than man's wisdom. So, willing to be thought a fool, he kept holding up the miracle of God becoming the man on the cross, In the same way, this particular fool in front of you has been trying to grasp the truth of what Paul preached, and am going to share with you a teaching that has helped me.

My daughter sent me a little book called The Prodigal God, and, as you can imagine, it is based on the parable that we usually call the Prodigal Son. Tim Keller, the author, reminds us that in this story, the Father had TWO sons, and each one represents a different way to be alienated from God. The obvious prodigal was the son who took his inheritance, and blew it on wine, women, and song, ending up by starving in a pig sty. The elder brother, though, was equally alienated from his father, and that is a little less obvious. We can see it when the younger son returns, and the older brother is furious that the father is throwing a party for his good- for-nothing sibling, and refuses to attend. He is bitter over the father's love for the younger son, and reminds the father of how good he has been for all the years that his brother was wasting. By his outrage, he shows that he was

doing the right thing for all those years not because he loved the father, but in order to EARN the father's approval and love. When he found out that the younger son had the father's love in spite of his actions, he went ballistic. It was just not fair. After all, doesn't God, at least secretly, love those of us who are righteous more than those other folk who are such awful sinners.

Paul was preaching to both of these kinds of brothers - both kinds of people. One group were the morally corrupt - the younger sons and daughters who hung out with the temple prostitutes in Corinth, who were sexually immoral, engaged in drunken behavior, and who argued and quarreled with other church members. But Paul was also speaking to the self righteous, older sons among the church in Corinth. These are the equivalent of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who Jesus found so difficult, and who eventually had Him crucified. These were the people who studied and obeyed the letter of the Law, and probably were the folks who most regularly attended worship.. What is wrong with that? No wonder Paul calls the message of the cross foolishness, for in human wisdom, these are just the kind of folk who are 'good' Christians - the kind of people that can be found in churches everywhere today. But in this parable from the gospel of

Luke, there are two lost sons. Strangely, as Tim Keller says, "The elder brother is not losing the father's love in spite of his goodness, but because of it. It is not his sins that create the barrier between him and his father, it's the pride he has in his moral record: it's not his wrongdoing but his righteousness that is keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father." His way on controlling his father, (or our way of controlling God) is by saying now I've done this, and I've done that, and you owe me such and such....." Pride in his goodness and self righteousness, was keeping him from enjoying the feast of salvation. In this parable, neither son loved the father for himself. They were using him - in opposite ways - to get him to do what they wanted, and to give them what they wanted. By being either a younger brother, or an elder brother, we are trying to be our own Savior, instead of leaning on what Paul calls the foolishness of the cross. For we know that Paul had greatly sinned, and yet found complete peace, grace and love in the crucified savior- "we preach Christ crucified" he says over and over. He alone is our Savior - NOT our actions or inactions.

We can't find salvation in Bible study, or in prayer, or in good deeds. As a matter of fact, we may need to repent of our good deeds if they are done to make ourselves our own savior, to put God in our service or make

Him obligated to us in some way. I can be a self-righteous, pompous poop, and that behaviour is what led to Jesus' crucifixion. But if we return again and again to the bible to find the resurrected Christ, bible study will be transformative. Only our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ can change hearts, and bring us closer to having the agape love described in chapter 13. It is the kind of love God has for us, and that we can have for each other as Christ transforms our hearts. A sure sign that the Holy Spirit is central in our lives is when we are able to recognize God's presence in others - especially those who are different from us.

This last week-end I went to southern Illinois with a friend to go walking in some of the beautiful Shawnee National Forest. It was a VERY rural area, and on Sunday morning, we decided that we wanted to go to church. There was a tiny white Baptist church in the middle of an old cemetery - just up the road from where we were staying. We hesitantly opened the door just before 11 on Sunday morning, and there were about a dozen people in the sanctuary. Each one of them came and greeted us personally, and the service began. There was no official pastor, but a young man whose day job was 'working in a store' got up to preach, and he preached a strong message of what people are like if they hang around Jesus. He said

that we should be able to recognize each other because we would be living lives of compassion and kindness and inner strength. As he spoke, we recognized the risen Christ in him, and we hoped very much that he saw the same in us.

I would like to close today with the testimony of a friend, Star Patterson. She and her husband are newly members of ZPC, and I think that her life, and that of her family, are centered on living a resurrected kind of transformed life. I look forward very much to hearing her, and know that you, too, will be inspired and encouraged.