

“From Nanaimo to Corinth...and back again, Part Two: Eloquence”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for January 22nd 2017 (Third Sunday after Epiphany)
by Foster Freed

1st Corinthians 1: 10-17

Let’s begin by acknowledging the extent to which this next section...this morning’s section of Paul’s 1st letter to the Church in Corinth, provides a textbook example as to just how complex these epistles can be...and how much work is involved in following the logic of Paul’s thought.

For starters, please note that we have moved, this morning, from the letter’s preliminaries to its body. After all: last Sunday we read and pondered Paul’s opening greeting to the community, followed by the thanksgiving he offers on their behalf. By contrast, today, we have heard—and will have an opportunity to ponder—the opening salvo in the letter’s real meat: the first of the issues Paul plans to address. And we learn, almost at the outset, that Paul has received word—no doubt in the form of a face to face visit—from some folks he describes as having come to him from the household of his friend Chloe. They tell Paul that there are dissensions in the congregation: that they are not of one mind on a number of key issues. Let’s presume that Paul, here, is not concerned that there is a lack of **uniformity** amongst them...

...God preserve us, especially on a morning when we shall gather to deliberate as a congregation, God preserve us from the expectation of a dreary uniformity of belief inside the Church of Jesus Christ!...

...let’s presume that a lack of uniformity is not the issue, but rather an increasing lack of **unity** and **mutual respect** within the Corinthian faith community: the sense that they were no longer even playing for the same team: some of them placing their primary allegiance in the founder of the community, namely Paul...others devoting their primary allegiance to a teacher who subsequently came to them, namely Apollos. Others still speak of their allegiance to Cephas: presumably Simon Peter whom we have no record of having visited Corinth, but perhaps he did! Finally, some regard themselves as owing their allegiance to Christ which, of course, on the surface sounds like a good thing: unless they are claiming that they are the **only** members of the community entitled to regard themselves as Christ’s! Now: whether any of that represents a full blown decent into factionalism is something scholars dispute. But it certainly represents a tendency which, if not checked, is going to lead to full blown factionalism, and Paul is not happy with any of it, leading him to ask a series of three questions: “Is Christ divided?” [That’s the first question, presumably the answer being “hell no!”] “Was Paul crucified for you?” [That’s the second question, presumably the answer once again being an emphatic “no!”] Finally, “Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” [Once again, the answer

to that third and final question is “no”!] But here’s where things get slightly out of hand, if we’re trying to follow Paul’s logic.

You see: at this point in the letter, Paul goes into a bit of what can only be described as a tangent, a sidebar. Having raised the issue of baptism—making the point that they were not baptized in **his** name—he proceeds to make a further point, namely that he is pleased that he himself did not baptize many of them. He recalls having baptized only Crispus and Gaius: and is delighted to note that this is a good thing since they can’t go around saying that they were baptized in his name. But then there is a delightful break in the letter! Presumably Paul was dictating this letter to his travelling companion Stephanas, who must have interrupted him at this point, and reminded Paul that in actual fact, Paul had baptized his family as well. And so Paul adds what is, in effect, a footnote: mentioning to his readers that, “oh yes: I did baptize Stephanas and his family as well”, further acknowledging that beyond that he doesn’t recall baptizing anyone else...at least not to the best of his memory. It’s a charming interruption: but then Paul gets back to the main thread of his train of thought.

Not only is he glad he didn’t baptize many of them; he now goes on to make the point that Christ has not sent him out into the world in order to baptize! As he insists at the close of this section: *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.* To preach! To preach the Gospel! But not...not with words of eloquent wisdom! Nothing wrong...nothing wrong with baptizing, mind you. As an evangelist, however, that was not Paul’s foundational vocation. He was called to preach...to preach the Gospel...but not with eloquent wisdom. And therein lies a tale...a tale...and a puzzle...and yes, a mystery.

* * * * *

I want to focus...I want to focus on that word “eloquence”. It’s hard to duck the impression that there may well be a connection between the use of that word, and the name of Apollos: that teacher who showed up in Corinth after Paul had departed. In the book Acts we learn that a man named Apollos—noted for his “eloquence” (there’s that word again)—arrived in Ephesus (a city in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey) and began to preach, quite impressively! That having been said, we’re also told that the doctrine Apollos preached wasn’t quite kosher, but two of the disciples took him aside, brought him up to speed, and then dispatched him to Greece, presumably including the city of Corinth. And so we know that this Apollos was distinguished by the eloquence of his speech, although we also know—and this cannot be stressed strongly enough—we know that Apollos is not the enemy here: when Paul speaks of him further on in the letter, he does so with affection. So if Paul, in this letter, is cautioning against eloquence, it is definitely not meant as an attack on Apollos, but possibly a caution offered to those at Corinth who valued such eloquence so highly that they lost track of the things that actually matter.

And yes: if at this juncture, I fail to take note of the connection between the concern Paul is articulating here—and the work I try to do Sunday by Sunday—we can only conclude that I have my head buried deep inside an ostrich hole! For nearly 27 years, I have preached between 45 and 50 sermons a year. Prior to that, I spent four years in seminary, putting together the building blocks of the preacher’s craft. And yes: for the decade before I entered seminary—as I read my way into the Church—I was already (unbeknownst to me) cultivating some of the passion for theology that has informed my preaching since 1990. While it’s true that I preach as an in-house pastor rather than as an out-in-the-world evangelist (which is what Paul undertook), those two endeavours share the fact that they attempt to marshal language—attempt to shape words—in order to proclaim the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, in a way that will connect with the hearts and minds of those on the receiving end of those words. And yes: doing so knowing full well that sometimes those words will **fail** to connect with those on the receiving end.

Indeed! 26+ years of experience have taught me only too well that Paul knows of what he speaks when he expresses the hope that his preaching avoids merely *eloquent wisdom lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power*. There are limits to what our human eloquence can accomplish, limits to what our naked words—our human speech—can accomplish, devoid of the undergirding of God’s spirited power. And yet! And yet! In the actuality of the lives we lead...in the full complexity of the world in which we live...is there not at least **some** need for us to find a language sufficiently eloquent to capture something of the actuality...something of the complexity of this vast and puzzling world?

* * * * *

I found myself this past week, thinking about a Preface Karl Barth wrote—as a very young pastor—when he published the revised edition of his first book: a commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans. Barth first published the commentary at the tail end of the First World War, in 1918. It created quite the firestorm when it was first published, turning the young Barth in to something of a *cause celebre* in a central European world that was picking up the pieces from the cataclysm of that horrific war. Four years later, in 1921, he published a much expanded and much revised version of the commentary, and provided a Preface that is probably the most famous part of that revised commentary. At one point...as he ponders the various critiques he received to the first version of the commentary, he notes that one writer criticized the fact that Barth’s commentary lacked the sort of “simplicity”—the sort of simplicity—this writer expected in a work dealing with the things of God. Barth’s response is worth hearing.

“For us,” he writes...“for us neither the Epistle to the Romans, nor the present theological position, nor the present state of the world, is simple. And he who is now concerned with truth must boldly acknowledge that he cannot be

simple. In every direction human life is difficult and complicated. And, if gratitude be a consideration that is at all relevant, men will not be grateful to us if we provide them with short-lived pseudo-simplifications.” If that was true in 1921...it is certainly no less true 97 years later. Go no further than the events of the past two days. Whether one is in solidarity with those who gathered on Friday to cheer the beginning of a new Presidency in Washington D.C., or in solidarity with those who the following day marched throughout the world to protest that same Presidency, let’s have the decency to acknowledge that the world is a far from simple place, and that an important part of what we strive to do as human beings, is to find words with which to help us clarify its complexity, even if we know in advance that our words will always fall short of the mark.

And yes, yes, yes! All of that is a special burden—at any rate **ought** to be a special burden—to the preacher. And yes: trust me. If you think that the worst thing that can happen to a preacher is that someone will disagree with something he or she says in their sermon, please think again. If someone disagrees, it may indicate that they actually understood at least something that was said! That’s cause for celebration. No. It’s those times when you sense you have simply failed to connect...that people, despite your best efforts, have walked away scratching their heads, wondering what in the world you were talking about...and leaving you—as the preacher—fearing that you were striving for mere eloquence rather than for the proclamation of the Gospel. That you were simply parading your learning, rather than sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Those are the heart-breaking Sundays...and I suspect they happen far more frequently than any of us care to acknowledge. Nevertheless: in the very process of trying to avoid over-simplification...in the very process of trying to embody something of the complexity with which we all wrestle in the midst of a world that can be so terribly confusing...we can easily find ourselves losing sight of the main event: losing our hold on the power of the Gospel that brings us to this place Sunday after Sunday after Sunday...as we seek to catch a glimpse not of the preacher’s eloquence (God forbid!), but rather a glimpse of the radiant splendour of our God.

* * * * *

At the end of the day...when push comes to shove, I’d like to think that’s the point Paul is making here: the real point he’s making...the real truth that he’s after. Not that he has anything against taking the time to craft our language, our message, our words...but that he wants to remind us that the Church is something other than an academy...that the point of our gatherings isn’t to put the preacher’s cleverness on display...not even to put our shared cleverness on display: not even in a United Church that has always prized an educated clergy. Solid education is one thing; parading that education is something else: and it’s most certainly not a path that leads to fruitfulness....unless...

...unless that learning...that education...is used to point quite specifically to God’s power at work in Jesus...and yes—to utilize Paul’s

provocative phrase...to point with a focused determination that leads listeners not only to Jesus but quite directly to his Cross...so that nothing (including the preacher's eloquence) will distract from the Cross of Christ lest it be emptied of its power. Thereby Paul offers us a trenchant reminder that the power of the Gospel doesn't reside with me nor even with us and not even with polite generalities about the divine but resides precisely there: in the Cross, the Cross of Jesus Christ in which we find God's real presence and our true unity.

But what in the world, pray tell, does Paul mean by that? What is Paul getting at when he directs us to the power that resides in the Cross of Jesus Christ?

Well: suffice it to say: that is a monumental question...one so monumental that it deserves a sermon of its own. But to hear that sermon, you'll need to return seven days from now.

May we all live to see that day! In Jesus' name!! Amen!!