

“From Nanaimo to Corinth...and back again, Part Four: Epiclesis”  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for February 5<sup>th</sup> 2017 (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany)  
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1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Chapter 2

Let's start with that word: that four-syllable Greek word that provides the title to this morning's reflection. Epiclesis. Epiclesis: a word that literally means “invocation” or “calling down from on high,” but which—in the technical language used in the study of the Christian liturgy—refers to a particular moment in the Communion service. Which moment? The moment when the Presider asks the Holy Spirit to bless the elements...to bless the bread and cup that they might become for us the body and blood of Christ. Knowing full well that we, in the United Church of Canada, don't lose too much sleep debating such things as transubstantiation (the Catholic perspective) versus consubstantiation (the Lutheran perspective), and suspecting that we would tend to be divided between low-church types who regard the bread and cup as symbolic representations of Jesus Christ versus high-church types (myself included) who believe that the “real presence” of Christ is offered through our Communion meal...surely...surely what we **can** agree upon is that the heart of what we do here Sunday by Sunday...especially on those Sundays when we gather round this table...

...surely we can agree that whatever happens here of lasting value happens because God in and through the Spirit is present in our midst. God's Spirit! The Holy Spirit! At work in our midst...in ways we often don't even notice let alone acknowledge. The Holy Spirit: touching, changing, inspiring, challenging, provoking and ministering to us as we gather, as we worship, and as we make our way back into the world. And yes: that's a pretty good entry point—this talk of the Holy Spirit!—a pretty good entry point into the issues the Apostle Paul addresses in the second chapter of his first letter to the Church in Corinth.

And you know: I must say: a cynic—were they to encounter this second chapter having read the first chapter—a cynic might be tempted to characterize the second chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, as the chapter in which the Apostle Paul contradicts a whole lot of what he says in the **first** chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. I believe such contradiction is more apparent than real...but frankly, it's a fair observation, especially given the fact that Paul begins this second chapter by reiterating one of the key points he made in the first chapter, namely that the Cross is divine foolishness that, nevertheless, manages to put human wisdom to shame. That's why, he insists, he did not come to them with eloquent words and wisdom. And yet...having repeated that point, Paul immediately admits that among the mature...presumably experienced Christians...he does—in fact—seek to impart wisdom. What's he getting at here? Hopeless contradiction? Or a point so subtle, that it can appear to be a contradiction? .



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Permit me to begin...permit me to begin by noticing something that is pretty hard to overlook when we contemplate 2000 years of Christian history. I'm referring to the fact that the Christian Gospel—the Gospel Paul so energetically preached from one end of the Mediterranean to the other—that Gospel has given birth to a vast 2000 year enterprise that has spanned the globe and in the process has generated an almost inconceivable wealth of cultural treasure. That treasure, of course, includes works of art: especially in the realms of music, architecture, the visual arts and imaginative literature. That tradition has also, of course, produced volume after volume after volume of a kind of house-literature we call “theology”. But finally, the Church has also helped give birth to what was once known as the handmaiden of theology, namely philosophy: an almost inevitable consequence of the Church's encounter with the wisdom embodied in the tradition of Greek philosophy. That encounter between the church and that ancient well-spring of wisdom—far from causing the Church to reject it as an unnecessary distraction—yielded a rich harvest of contemplative insight. Indeed: if you take a course in Medieval philosophy, most of the writers you'll study are the same writers you'll study if you take a course in Medieval theology. Nor, I maintain, is it a mere coincidence that the birth of modern science occurred within a culture that had been saturated by a philosophical tradition born when the Gospel came into contact with the world of ancient Greek philosophy. Whatever we need to say about the Apostle Paul...and his insistence that the Cross of Jesus Christ is divine foolishness that puts human wisdom to shame...the one thing we cannot say is that the Gospel produced an anti-intellectual tradition, one in which the life of the mind was held in contempt. Nothing could be further from the truth. But then what does it mean for Paul—surely to be counted as one of the key founders of the Christian tradition—what does it mean when with one breath he reminds the Corinthians that he did not come to preach human wisdom...but that yes, to those who are ready to receive it...he has plenty of wisdom on offer?

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I recently read...recently read...a thoughtful comment about the difference between Christian and non-Christian works of philosophy, that difference pretty much consisting in the additional set of data a Christian philosopher will be prepared to incorporate into his or her work. After all: what philosophy tries to do, is to make sense of the world using the gift of reason applied to the data we have at our disposal concerning that world. Provided a Christian philosopher regards the Gospel as an illuminating part of the fabric of the world she is exploring, it's bound to have an impact. Indeed: when one ponders the Gospel not from the perspective of some generalized theory of religion...in which the essence of Christianity is pretty much the same as the essence of any other religion...but rather sees the Gospel in all of its awkwardness, that's bound to have an impact. As one especially playful contemporary Christian thinker puts it:



we who follow Jesus worship a God who is odd! And yes: there is nothing odder, more peculiar in the Christian universe than the centrality of the cross: a centrality Paul especially liked to emphasize. Which may have something to do with Paul's insistence that the truthfulness of the Gospel—the reality of this God who is odd—cannot be demonstrated through human wisdom: it is either received or rejected. No amount of clever speech could possibly make the Gospel's truth any less peculiar! And yet: once that truth is received, all kinds of wisdom can follow on its heels. That seems to be the heart of Paul's argument here: you cannot reason your way to the Cross of Jesus Christ, though once you get there, all kinds of wisdom flows and flowers! And the kicker...the real kicker...is that you can't reason your way there, because you only get there through the witness of the Holy Spirit!

*What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the heart of man imagined,  
what God has prepared for those who love Him, writes Paul:*

*...these things God has revealed to us **through the Spirit**....And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught **by the Spirit**, interpreting **spiritual** truths to those who **are spiritual**. That's the beginning and the end of all wisdom, as Paul understands it. Minus the Spirit...nothing. With the Spirit...all things are possible...and all things stand illumined by the light of God.*

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Well: I would be lying were I to pretend that there isn't something a wee bit unsettling about this whole train of thought: a train of thought that pretty much makes the claim that if you don't get the Gospel...

...if you don't get the peculiar things of Jesus Christ...

...it's obviously because the Spirit hasn't yet let you in on the secret...and there is nothing we—for our part— can do to fix that other than tell you the Gospel story yet one more time and—of course—pray for you, in the hope that this time you will get zapped!

And I know only too well that someone on the outside-looking-in, having been told by us on the inside-looking-out, that they won't get the wisdom of the Gospel until the Holy Spirit chooses to impart that wisdom to them, I suspect that someone hearing that would be, shall we agree, somewhat miffed: as if we had just patted them on the head and, in effect told them: nice try, but you're not there yet! Indeed: as someone who once **was** very much on the outside-looking-in, I know just how arrogant Christians can appear to be, when it feels like they're saying: "Well, you just don't get it...and we feel sorry for you, but until the Spirit moves ya...until the Spirit opens your eyes to the truth...you're just gonna have to wait." That's a highly annoying message on which to be on the receiving end.



And yet...it's no more irritating than some of the awful and pointless arguments we can find ourselves initiating, when we are foolish enough to think that we can arm-wrestle someone into getting the good news of the Gospel! Which means that maybe...maybe Paul knew what he was talking about...and maybe he really wasn't being arrogant when he simply confessed that whatever wisdom he might possess...whatever insight he might have that was worth sharing with others...was not truly his at all, but merely a gift on loan to him: on loan to him through the Spirit.

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That places us right back, doesn't it: back at this table...this table to which we will soon approach with open hands, and open hearts, ready to receive. And yes...listen especially closely about 20 minutes from now...as we bless the elements...which is to say as we ask **God** to bless the elements. And listen for that moment when I will invoke the Holy Spirit: when I will share the epiclesis in this morning's liturgy. You'll hear me say:

*We pray you, God of Love:  
send your Holy Spirit upon us and what we do here,  
that we, and these gifts—touched by your Spirit—  
may be signs of life and love to each other,  
and to all the world.*

Hear those words when they are spoken. And remember...remember just how much God's lively Spirit wishes to do for you...for me...for us...not only within the hallowed walls of this sanctuary...but in the lives we lead out there, in a world filled with so much beauty...and yet a stubbornly violent world that stands in such need of our love, our dedication, our courage, our commitment, our hope, our faith...and yes...yes...even our wisdom. Not really **our** wisdom at all...but the wisdom of the God whose foolishness puts even our most clever insights to shame...and whose Cross...

...as ugly an instrument of torture as human ingenuity has ever devised...

...whose Cross has become the ultimate symbol of God's undying love for us all. Go figure!

In Jesus' name! Amen!