

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 5, 2017

Prayer of the Day: Almighty God, you sent your one and only Son as the Word of life for our eyes to see and our ears to hear. Help us to believe what the Scriptures proclaim about him and do the things that are pleasing in your sight; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Alleluia! (John 8:12)

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

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¹ When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

I was looking for them, but I could not find them. A friend had asked me to explain the differences between Christianity and Islam. More specifically, we were talking about the G/god each religion worships. You know "Christ"-ian teachings are just that— teachings centered on "Christ." And Christ teaches that God is one God, but three distinct persons ([Matthew 28:19](#); [John 10:30-33](#)). At Jesus' baptism, you see Jesus standing there God-in-flesh, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove, and the Father's voice booms ([Mathew 3:16-17](#)). Yet, Islam teaches there is only one god and he is only one person: Allah. Jesus is a great prophet, second only to Muhammad— and Jesus the prophet has since died. As for the Holy Spirit, well, Islam teaches he does not exist.

My friend is Christian; she knows God is three persons in one God. Yet, she had a Muslim friend, who, if he left Islam, could be executed. So, here was her problem: Why should her friend risk his life to worship the true God (of Christianity) when he can just worship the false god (of Islam)?

To be honest, it was a frustrating discussion. No, we did not get angry at each other. With all humility, I shared what God teaches in the Bible. The absolutely most frustrating part of it all is that I just could not change her mind. No matter what Bible verses I pointed to, she would not accept that it did matter what God you worship.

I was looking for them, but I could not find them. You know— those magic words. That only if I said the right thing, I could get her to immediately and automatically agree with me.

Those would be great to have, right? —those magic words. That if only you said the right things to a troubled Christian or to a straying believer or to a skeptical nonbeliever, then you would immediately change their mind and they would instantly believe (or at least, agree with you). If you are looking for "magic words" to instantly convert someone, God tells you today: "Stop looking for them."

That's right. If you are looking for ways that you can change the mind of anyone, you need to redirect your attention. God has already given you words to speak. God already packs power behind those words. **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON REACHING OUT!** *Proclaim Christ crucified and Watch the Holy Spirit work.*

The one thing this Corinthian congregation so desperately wanted was words. And not just any plain old words, but wise words. In last week's sermon you heard: "*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom*" ([1 Corinthians 1:22](#)).

The Greeks (that is, the non-Jewish) craved intellectual challenges. People wanted a teaching based on emotions— what felt is fair and right. People wanted teachings to make sense to the human mind. So, people relied on arguments. If you could prove your beliefs were fair, then maybe you could silence an opponent. If you could explain mysteries about God and answer curiosity, then people crowded around you. So, philosophers challenged the notion that God even exists. Scholars debated how many gods there might be. Even the working-class offered opinions on how to keep the gods happy.

So, when Paul stands in the pulpit, the eyes of the congregation are fixed on him. *Jews search for miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.* And Paul, well, maybe he could point at something on earth and undeniably prove the existence of God. Perhaps he will point out the faulty logic of other preachers and share how many gods he thinks exist. Maybe Paul figured out a way to make his guilt go away and would now share his methods with the congregation. He could amaze them with his intelligence or win them with his astounding wisdom. He could make them feel smart and intellectual. He might have the magic words to win every argument.

Paul stands up, draws in a breath, holds up a finger, opens his mouth and says: **When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom[;] I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.** What does he proclaim? He *proclaims Christ crucified.*

So many philosophers gave personal opinions about how a god interacted with people. That opinion could change tomorrow or the next day or a year from now. But Paul pointed to a factual event: *Christ was crucified*— literally. A real governor named Pilate sentences Jesus to be stretched out on a cross until he suffocates to death.

Many philosophers brainstormed ways to get right with God, but Paul points to a reality: *Christ was crucified.* No, not by random chance. No, not because Jesus had to stop living (for the sake of not living). Christ dies because death is a punishment for sin ([Romans 6:23](#)). God doesn't tell you to be the best parent; he tells you to be the perfect parent— with infinite patience and loving discipline. He wants you to teach your children about God. God doesn't tell you to be a good child; he tells you to be the perfect child— obedient to your parents even when you don't agree with them, never yell at them, never think mean thoughts, never argue. God commands no hatred locked up in your heart, no lust in your mind, no greedy thinking, no laziness or excuses when it comes to worshipping your God on Sunday. If you are perfect you gain eternal life. If you stumble just once, God guarantees to punish you ([James 2:10](#)).

There is nothing you can do to win God's favor. The only hope you have for heaven is *Christ crucified.* Yes, many scholars believed in an afterlife— but they did not know if you would live with the gods or have a pain-free eternity or if you could be thrown from Elysium

[heaven] and into Hades [hell]. Yet, Paul points to a certainty: *Christ crucified*. Jesus is the Lamb of God who carries your every single sin ([John 1:29](#); [Isaiah 53](#)). God punishes Jesus for the sins he carries. That is why *Christ is crucified*. When Jesus rises again, he demonstrates that your debt has been paid and accepted.

So, Paul stands up, draws in a breath, holds up a finger, opens his mouth and preaches what? *Christ crucified*. He does not debate about how many gods there are or why there is one God; he simply points to the Bible. He does not try to point out the ways others are wrong; he simply directs their attention back to Jesus. He does not think of ways to convince others as to why his words are better than all the others; he simply retells the great things God has done.

You may look for those magic words—the words to win every argument, the words remove doubts, the words to end every challenge. You may even think about what you can say to get people to instantly and automatically agree with you. Maybe you just do not know what to say to a nonbelieving friend. Maybe you feel you are not as smart as your college-educated family member. Here is God's point: You don't need to be college-educated to share your faith. You do have something to say to a nonbelieving friend. You do not have to concoct logical arguments. God has given you his Word and you get to tell others the most important thing the world will ever know: *Proclaim Christ crucified* and *Watch the Holy Spirit work*.

Maybe that is where your frustration truly lies. You know *Christ crucified*. Maybe you have told an educated friend or a nonbelieving child or a neighbor that Jesus died to remove sin—but they didn't believe you. It's the greatest, best news the world will ever hear—and it is met with rejection!

And so, you may feel you did something wrong. Or that you did not say something clear enough. Or that you did not say something to capture their emotions or catch their mind! Or that the message must change.

That might be the greatest frustration when it comes to sharing your faith. You speak... and you see no results. The immediate thought is that you need to do something more. You need to stop talking about Jesus and start talking about current events that people want to hear. You need to find ways to make people excited. You need to demonstrate wisdom and intelligence and astound people with your words! If you think you are the reason people believe, then you have just stepped into role of God.

Paul says: **“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.”** The only Words that will change the hearts of people are God's Words. Those are the same Words that worked on you.

Through the Bible the Holy Spirit teaches you who God is, what Savior he sent, and that you are forgiven. You know this! More than that, the Holy Spirit works on your heart to accept these words as true. So, when you listen to our three readings, when you confess your sins and hear your forgiveness, you know I am not making these words up. You accept that God speaks to you. The Holy Spirit continues building up and strengthening your trust in God's promises.

So, you and I can take verse 1 and make it personal: “When I come to friend, to a family member, a stranger, I do not need to come with wisdom or eloquence. I get to *proclaim Christ crucified* and *watch the Holy Spirit work*.”

What a relief! The power to create faith rests with God. That means God does not give you a quota to fill out— as though you must get <this number of people> to believe or else he is angry with you. God simply gives you his Word and tells you to share it.

Here's one way that you, as an individual, can share Jesus. In your bulletin is a half sheet. On it you see a diagram. Identify people from your circle of friends, family, relatives, neighbors—specific people in your life. So, this does not require you to knock on doors and talk to complete strangers. These are people you already know and they know you. You care for them; they care for you. You have a relationship with them; they have a relationship with you. You trust them; they trust you.

Because of that connection they may be more open to listening. They will not wonder if a stranger knocking on their door has ulterior motives. They will not grow suspicious that you want something from them. You, being their friend, allows them to know that they can ask you about any question they have about Jesus.

So, take the sheet, fill it out as best as you can. Place on an end table or on the refrigerator. Then pray. Pray that you might be the one to share Jesus with them. Ask God to give you the “right” opportunity to speak. Ask God to give you the confidence and courage to speak with them. Continue praying— after all, God is serious about hearing your prayer and answering it. Find that one time when you can invite them to a church event, to a worship service, or to a Bible class. Invite them to get to know your pastor or a fellow member. If you are on Facebook, share posts from our St. John facebook page. Your friends can see that post; they might even read it.

You, as a congregation, together, get to support reaching out. By giving your offerings or increasing your offerings, you help fund outreach opportunities.

This year, we will send out postcard-sized-invites for Easter Sunday worship. Three thousand postcards will cover the area between Harrison and Clare. Why? Because there are still people crushed under the guilt of sin. There are still people who do not know how to get right with God. There are still people who need to know a Savior paid for their sins and brings peace.

Thousands of households will be invited to service— and invited to your church website. Yes, maybe we send out 3,000 postcards and no one worships with you. You can feel like we failed, but you'll have a hard time finding that true from the Bible. The Bible alone has the power to change hearts. Sending out these postcards— if anything— sends your congregation's name to 3,000 households. That means 3,000 households will know your congregation exists and has some special news to share. You have planted a seed. You never know when it will sprout— and it's not up to you to make the seed sprout. That's good; it removes unneeded stress. Instead, we get to pray for the privilege of *Watching the Holy Spirit work*.

You don't need “magic words.” That if only you said the right things to a troubled Christian or to a straying believer or to a skeptical nonbeliever, then you would immediately change their mind and they would instantly believe (or at least, agree with you).

You don't need “magic words” because God points you to his powerful Word. His Word brought you to faith. His Word keeps you in that saving faith. He gives you that same powerful Word to share with others. Simply *Proclaim Christ crucified* and *Watch the Holy Spirit work* as you **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON REACHING OUT!**