

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI  
Pastor Mark Gartner  
Sermon for Epiphany 5 – February 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011

## **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**

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

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are some events that are so etched in our memory that we can never forget about them. Most people can remember exactly where they were or what they were doing when events like the bombings of Twin Towers on 9/11, or the blowing up of the Challenger Space Shuttle, or maybe the death Elvis, or the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or the assassination of President Kennedy. Many of you have lived through a number of those moments. Those that you did live through, I bet you remember them vividly. We call them, defining moments. There are a good number in our congregation who actually have lived through all of them.

Those are defining moments on a grand scale, affecting millions of people, affecting entire nations. Let's personalize this. What would be the defining moment in your life? I would have a hard time coming up with just one. I would rather do a whole bunch events, because there are so many. What would be the defining moment in your life, if you were to choose one? An event that impacted you so much, that it actually helped to shape who you are, today? It might depend on your age, might depend on your life experience. Would it be Confirmation, graduation from high school, or college, your first job, your current job, marriage, divorce, re-marriage, the birth of children, an accident? Would it be a health crisis, the loss of a loved one, a move across the city, across the state, across the country, retirement? All of those could be, defining moments in our lives.

For the last two decades or so, we've had psychologists and psychiatrists and talk show hosts, pushing us to do this, to go back in our past, to dig into events, especially our childhood, to find clues as to who we are, and why we are the way that we are. Traumatic events especially, are said to have an impact on us. It can seem like lives are altered, perspectives changed, and if it's a really traumatic event, maybe even hope is lost. I don't know what you would pick for that defining moment, good or bad, but no matter what it is, you didn't go back far enough.

Today, to find the defining moments in our lives, we need to go back before 9-11, before the death of Elvis, before Pearl Harbor. We need to go back even before we were born. To find the defining moment of your life and mine, we've got to go back before Luther and the reformation, before Paul, the author of our text. We need to:

### **Theme: Look Back To the Cross**

- 1. There you will find the power of the Holy Spirit**
- 2. There you will find the power of God's grace**

Paul is writing to Christians who are rather new to the faith, mostly Gentiles, some Jews, in Corinth. Corinth was a very big, world-class city. Apart from Athens, it was the leading city in Greece for commerce and culture, but it wasn't all on the up and up. I'm not trying to pick on this poor city, but it's kind of like Vegas. In Vegas, you've got the slogan - "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas!" What happened in Corinth, stayed in Corinth. Corinth was known for its immorality, for its open wickedness. Back then they

even coined a word that described a pretty intense night on the town. It was said that you were going to – “go corinthianize!”

So the people of Corinth, and the new Christians there, were quite worldly. They were very impressed with the worldly wisdom, worldly things, philosophy, and they loved, we find out from Paul’s writings, they loved to hear excellent speakers speak. Paul could do all those things. Paul had a university education at a secular university, second to none. He had the best theological education, sitting at the feet of the well known rabbi named, Gamaliel. Everybody wanted to be his student. Paul had been his student. Paul was the ‘Pharisee of the Pharisees’. No one did religion, taught it, knew it, lived it, better than Paul. Saul, that is, before he became Paul. He could communicate very clearly and powerfully. He was the---‘Best of the Best’!

But, when he got to Corinth, on his first visit to preach the gospel, and to establish a church, he says, **“When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom, as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except, Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you with weakness and fear, and with much trembling.”** Weakness and fear? Trembling? The apostle Paul? The great apostle Paul?

Before he came to Corinth, he had passed through Athens, and in Acts 17, we learn that Paul did not have a very good experience in Athens. He was in the market place, in an open public area, and he noticed that there were altars to all the different god that the Greeks had, and the Greeks were very practical philosophical people. They didn’t want to miss out on any gods, or offend any, so they had this altar to an unknown god. Now if you were a god and the Greeks had not acknowledged you, that would cover it for you, right? You would be OK with being the unknown god. It’s just illogical. So Paul tackled that. He tried to reason with them. He said, “I want to tell you about this unknown god”, but he didn’t get a chance to finish the full message of Christianity. He left. He felt that his time there was a failure.

So the apostle has his tail between his legs, and he goes on to the next big town, world- class city, filled with smart and sophisticated people. They loved commerce, they loved culture, they loved debates, and they loved excellent public speakers. So when he came to Corinth, Paul put aside eloquence, word-play, super creativity. He put aside superior, worldly wisdom. He set aside showmanship, and he kept it simple. Christ crucified! Christ on the cross! Christ and nothing else!

Now simple to the world, means stupid. It means foolish. It means don’t waste your time. Simple in the kingdom of God is true wisdom, and true power, because as Paul writes in this same letter, The foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom. The weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. And, so Paul had success in Corinth. **“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with the demonstration of the spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.”** For Paul, preaching was not about creativity, or superior speaking ability. It was about Christ! Christ and him crucified! Christ risen again! For Paul, the defining moment is his life was not a promotion, or a graduation, or some great achievement on his part. The defining moment in Paul’s life took place on the cross, when Jesus proclaimed about the punishment for sin. “It is finished!”

Now about that defining moment for you, and for me. I just illustrated this point with the kids during the children’s devotion. Think about the past week of your life. We’re going to focus on some specific incidents. They are going to be different for each one of us, but the results are the same. We’re talking about sin. We are talking about sin, in thought, word and deed, over the past week, the past day, even the past hour. As we showed with the kids with the picture of the books and the piling up of the burden of sin. Sins seem so small when we do them. What or whom is really hurt?

So let’s get started! Have you in the last week, hurt friends or family members with your words or actions? (pick up book) In the past week, day, hour, have you lied to anyone? (pick up book) Have you not told the entire truth about something, which is just another way to lie? (pick up book) Have you treated anyone disrespectfully this week? (book) Have you refused to forgive anyone, for any reason this week? (book) Have you indulged in gossip, giving it? (book) How about receiving it? (book) Have you gotten into an argument with anyone this week? And---Boy! It just didn’t work out well, didn’t end well? (book) Have

you been impatient with anybody this week? (book) Have you gotten angry with anybody? (book) We would run out books and the strength to hold the books if we kept going, wouldn't we? How long do you think we can hold this "stack" of sin? The point is---nobody can carry the burden of sin. This doesn't even begin to picture the enormity of the debt on our sins. The enormity of the debt, not that we incur collectively, but that I incur, that you incur, individually. Sin crushes us! It dooms us! It damns us!

Now, if the way to heaven is---Christ plus something. Christ plus anything at all. Well then, it's like getting from Watertown by walking in the arctic cold and deep snow. We are not going to make it! There is no way to heaven by ourselves doing something to help God. There is no way to get there, if it's Christ, plus something. If, the way to heaven is Christ alone, Christ crucified, and nothing else. Well, then it's wide open, because of his perfect, sinless, righteous life, lived on our behalf, lived in our place. His innocent suffering and death on the cross, to pay the price for the sins of the world. To see my sins washed away in the precious stream of his blood that was shed on the cross of Calvary. His wonderful Easter morning guarantee of an empty tomb. Christ died for sins, once for all, when he offered himself. Once for all, for all time. Once for you, once for me.

And so the defining moment in your life is actually the same as mine. The defining moment in our lives is not some wonderful milestone that we might have achieved or accomplished or reached simply by virtue of age, perhaps. Nor is the defining moment in your life a traumatic experience, a circumstance that might have happened years ago. The defining moment in your life – and I really want you to get this, apply this to yourself – if you forget everything else this day, this is what you need to remember. The defining moment in your life, and in mine, took place just over 2000 years ago, on the cross, when Christ proclaimed to the world, and he proclaimed it to you and me. He said---“It is finished.” If anything is going to shape you, define you, mold you, impact you, make you into the person that you are to be, it's this---Christ on the cross. So in this regard, in regard to your spiritual life, resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Then your faith rests, not on man's wisdom, not on creative preaching, but on Christ and the cross. Christ alone.

As Christians we like to live for the future. We're always looking ahead. We awake each day knowing that we will have fistfuls, over-flowing basketfuls, of blessings from our heavenly Father. We look forward to the eternal day of everlasting life. We don't like to look in the past, as God's people, because we know that if, we look in our past, we will see sin and failure and devastation. But we need to do this one thing. We need to do this, and it needs to be for lack of a better word, a habit. It needs to be something that we continually, constantly do.

Look back to the cross, and know that what happened on the cross covers all that sin and failure and devastation. Because, when we look back at the cross, we see where we've come from, and not that we had anything to do with it. It's what God has given us in Christ, through his sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead. Knowing where we came from, helps us to know where we're going. Look to the cross and live. Amen.