

The Tale of Two Isthmus Cities

I Corinthians 2-3-3

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It is neither “the best of times nor the worst of times,” and the cities we are going to discuss are separated by two thousand years, but as we continue our sermon series on “Receiving the Spirit and Embracing our Gifts” we’re going to begin briefly with “The Tale of Two Isthmus Cities,” Madison, WI in the 21st century and Corinth, Greece in the 1st. Corinth, on an isthmus, was a prosperous commercial community at a crossroads. At the time Paul wrote to the church there, in the mid first century, it had only been about two hundred years since the Roman army had captured the city, destroying its buildings and executing or enslaving its people. A hundred years later, Julius Caesar re-founded it as a Roman colony in 44 BCE. This Roman influence infiltrated this Greek city. The Corinthians worked hard, and played hard. They were people who took great pride in their philosophies and their (Gnostic) intellectual ways as well as hosting the Isthmian Games, held a year before and a year after the Olympics.

Madison, whose capital sits on an Isthmus surrounded by beautiful lakes, founded 173 years ago, is a dynamic community committed to education and progressive thinking. Madison, takes great pride in being voted many times in national magazines as “the place to live” and seeks to be different than other places, yet obviously is still influenced by the country we live in. Madisonians, like the Corinthians, work hard and play hard. This is the only place I’ve ever served, ever lived, where we have to check football schedules before setting a meeting date! Both cities filled with compassionate, caring people: people in their own respective contexts seeking to live life to the fullest. Paul’s puzzling message in our lessons this morning to the Corinthians, and to us, addresses this purpose!

This second chapter of I Corinthians is said by many theologians to be the most difficult passage in Paul’s letter. It’s like Paul is juggling theological balls so fast that we can’t keep our eyes on them all, and although he doesn’t drop them, we do! So let’s look at them one by one. Before we do, we need to remember the context of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. People had been complaining to Paul about problems the community was experiencing. Two weeks ago, we looked at the first problem, factions in the community following different leaders. Today, we are going to look at the second problem, the first of our theological juggling balls, the complaints and criticism of some in the community that Paul did not do his job, specifically; Paul had not taught them the ways of wisdom. The first theological juggling ball is wisdom. The enthusiasts of the Greek philosophies were comparing those messages to the preaching of the Gospel, and the gospel was coming up short! So, essentially, Paul says, “okay, you want to talk wisdom, let’s talk about wisdom.”

Paul said, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. My speech and proclamation were not plausible words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,” [2:4] John Calvin, whose 500th birthday anniversary our pastor emeritus Bill King will honor in his sermon with us next week said, “The gospel so far transcends human intellect that to whatever height people of superior intellect may raise their view, they never can

reach its elevated height.” [Calvin’s Bible Commentaries: Corinthians, Part I, 1847, Republished in 2007 Forgotten Books, page 77]

God’s wisdom, the secret and hidden wisdom, is revealed in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. With that foundation laid, Paul puts forth the juxtaposition of God’s ways to human ways. The rulers of that age, and this age, the holders of power in the world then, and now, do not have a corner on the market of wisdom. Wisdom is not gained through philosophy but through the fulfillment of prophecy. Wisdom is not rhetoric but revelation. Wisdom is not following ascetic disciplines or any other human effort. Wisdom is a gift. The wisdom of God revealed in Christ, and Christ continues to reveal that wisdom through the Spirit he promised he’d send to teach us all things. The things that no eye has seen nor ear heard nor human heart conceived: the things that God has prepared for those who love God. Wisdom is not gained through knowledge but rather given through faith.

Faith then is the second theological juggling ball. Paul talking to the Corinthians, and to us Madisonians, is telling us about this wisdom “so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” [2:5] Human wisdom through philosophy, and education, and debates, and strategies, and history, and politics, and psychology, and sociology will enrich us, challenge us, make our lives individually and globally better, but it will disappoint us. Human wisdom will not satisfy our longing for God, the Psalmist knew this, Paul knew this, the Reformers knew this, and deep down each soul knows this.

Faith believes in the wisdom of God. Our scientific minds, our human wisdom lead us to question the cross. There is no doubt that the cross is a mystery. Can any of us prove the resurrection, no! Here is where the word of comfort from the author of Hebrews helps us, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” We cannot prove the resurrection but we can see evidence of it, through the Spirit Christ promised he would send to us after it. A disciple of Christ is not just one who follows the ways of Jesus the teacher but one who receives the Spirit that Christ promised before his death to send after his resurrection to enable us, to empower us, to live life to the fullest, to live the life we are called to live!

The Spirit working in our midst is the third theological juggling ball we will look at this morning. In our text today, Paul said, “Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” [2:12]. Our sermon series this summer is a journey we are taking to do just that...to understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. To receive the Spirit and embrace the gifts of God for the building up of the church and for service in the world. To receive the Spirit and embrace our gifts that we may live life to the fullest, a life of love, juggling all the balls, theological and otherwise, as we share that life with others.

This is neither “the best of times nor the worst of times,” but it is a challenging time. Paul addressed the problems in the Corinthian community and through his letter our problems as well. Unlike the first Corinthians our tale is not yet fully told. We live in a time of global unrest, wars, conflicts; escalated tensions are every day realities. We live in a time of global religious diversity and so we grapple with what that means. We live in a time where some extremists employ terror in the name of religion. We live in a time that our global economic situation is recovering some

stability but the ripple effects in terms of unemployment, housing markets, budget cuts, budget freezes, loss of retirement income from 30-61%, and worldwide financial recovery are yet to be seen.

All of these put stress on people's lives. Relationships are strained and mental, physical and emotional health impacted. What are we to do? We cannot juggle all these balls on our own...so we embrace God's gift of the Spirit that draws us into community. We toss out an offer of help or we stand ready to catch that toss. We listen with compassion. We seek to understand. We agree to disagree when we can and we work for compromise when we need to. We visit our elderly. We babysit the young. We mentor the students. We advocate for the marginalized. We feed the poor. We care for the sick. We serve the homeless. We work and prayer for peace and justice. As a community, we continue working hard and playing hard. In essence, we "be the church." And even though we don't understand it, through our faith and works we witness to God's wisdom, so that together we may perceive what God has prepared for us because we do love God!