

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button
Occasion: 3 Epiphany
Date: January 26, 2014
Themes: “Coach Paul and the J.V. Corinthians”
Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 1-18

NRS **1 Corinthians 1**

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

In the words of St. Paul I greet you: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

At last Sunday's annual meeting I declared, by the mighty authority invested in me by you, that 2014 would be “The Year of St. Paul.” I got the idea from a workshop led by Pastor Brenda Smith on claiming your congregation's biblical identity. It got me to thinking, “What would it mean for St. Paul Lutheran Church to dedicate a year to the study of St. Paul, his acts, letters, theology and missionary journeys?” Remember that a full 13 of the New Testament's 27 books bear the authorship of Paul.

Remember too that better than half of the book of the Acts of the Apostles is focused almost exclusively on the acts of Paul. Paul's letters are, as you may know, the earliest documents of the New Testament, pre-dating the composition of the first gospel by anywhere from 10-20 years.

There's no question that Paul was on the absolute ground floor of the



emergence of Christianity as its own unique testament to Israel's God, revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.



And for those of us in the Lutheran tradition, Luther's encounter with Paul's theology of grace was the spark that ignited the Reformation, transforming Western Christianity in ways that continue even to this very morning. There's so much to learn about, from, and with Paul that a year seems barely a tick of the clock for mining the riches to be found in Paul's witness.

But not to worry!

It won't be all Paul all the time. We are, as Paul himself declares in this morning's second lesson, saved by Christ, not Paul. But where and when our weekly lessons assign us a reading or a series of readings from Paul, I intend to take that shot. For these green Sundays after Epiphany that means an exploration of the First Letter to the Corinthians.



In last Sunday's sermon I explained how my own fumbling first years as a pastor led me to



fall in love with Paul, who had ministerial troubles of his own, particularly in, with, and among the saints in Corinth. In Paul's day Corinth was a busy seaport town, a major hub for trade and transportation on the Greek side of the Aegean Sea.

From Paul's letters and from the Acts of the Apostles, it appears that Paul arrived in Corinth somewhere around 50-51 a.d. (Historians would say "c.e." for "common era," but in church we can say "a.d." for "anno Domini," in the year of the Lord.) Paul's letters say he arrived in Corinth in

"fear and trembling" (2:3), perhaps after bruising experiences in other congregations. He thought he might be there for only a few weeks, but he ended up staying for a full year and half, during which time he had remarkable success in founding a church from Corinth's diverse population, including rich and poor, slave and free, male and female. Paul's preaching of the gospel had a profoundly liberating impact on these Corinthian Christians.



In the assembly of believers they experienced a tremendous burst of freedom from the typical social, sexual, political, and economic pigeonholes in which they normally lived. Suddenly, miraculously even, people were discovering gifts they never knew they had. The voiceless began to find their own voices, the weak revealed in new-found strength, and people who had long been regarded the lowest of the low now experienced spiritual heights that had for ages been thought reserved for only the greatest of the great. In the opening verses of First Corinthians, Paul says of these believers that in Christ they have been enriched in every way (1: 5), and further that they are not lacking in any spiritual gift (1: 7). That's very high praise, and so when Paul finally set sail from Corinth for Ephesus, on the opposite side of the Aegean, you can see how he felt confident that his work in Corinth was done and that the church was off and running.

Paul, though, is not long in Ephesus when a bombshell is dropped on him.

Paul receives a report from people associated with his colleague Chloe that there are quarrels brewing and divisions arising among the saints in Corinth. It seems that the Corinthians are dividing into camps over who they consider to be worthy of being their teacher. Since Paul's departure for Ephesus, the early Christian missionary Apollos has done some preaching and teaching there, and likewise the apostle Cephas, otherwise known as Peter, has also paid a visit to the Corinthian church.



Now Chloe's people are telling Paul that church members are picking sides over who is the greatest, and therefore the worthiest of their attention and esteem. Some are saying, "I belong to Apollos," others, "I belong to Paul," and still others, "I belong to Cephas." There's even a group who thinks of themselves as so utterly spiritual that they are declaring, "I belong to Christ."

It appears that the Corinthians have developed a little attitude, what in my family we called "the big head."



They've had a taste of the grace, mercy, and glory of Christ, but now they think that they are somehow the masters of the universe. It reminds me a little of my sophomore year at LSU. In my freshman year I had read a few books, written several papers, and had even scored a couple of A's. So at the start of my sophomore year I thought I had arrived. I knew some stuff. I could find my way around. I now had college friends. I was even in the honors program! Huh? Only later did I learn that the word sophomore is a

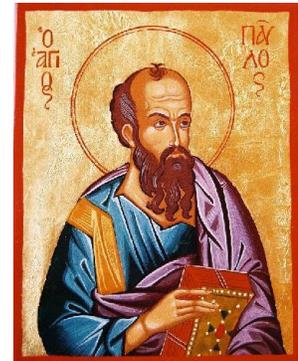
contraction of two Greek words meaning "wise idiot." You could say that the Corinthians were in the sophomore season of their Christian faith. They had learned much, received many gifts, and experienced tremendous growth, but they were still sophomores.

Paul is not amused at what he learns from Chloe's people.

He reacts a little like a coach who discovers that her team has now decided that they can run their own plays and call their own shots, thank you very much. Paul could, as you know, write with a very sharp quill, which he puts to work by firing off a string of obviously rhetorical questions:

- Has Christ been divided?
- Was Paul crucified for you?
- Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Paul comes just this short of calling them all a bunch of smarty-pants, but instead, he calls them back to the gospel. And the gospel is not about who's the smartest or the strongest or the most eloquent. The gospel is not about me or you or who is better or braver or more beautiful. The gospel is and ever shall be about Jesus who, as Paul wrote to the Philippians (2: 6-8),





though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.

For people obsessed with their own self-importance, for people impressed by their own intelligence and achievement, the gospel is the height of foolishness. How can salvation be found in a man publicly executed on a cross of shame and humiliation? How can anyone call Jesus savior when his own Scriptures say in Deuteronomy 21, “for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (v. 23)? How can wisdom, power, and freedom be found in anyone who takes the form of a slave, humbling himself to die the death reserved for Rome’s worst criminals?

Paul calls this the foolishness of God, the folly of the cross, but as Paul taught Corinth, and as he teaches us, it’s only as we give our hearts and minds, souls and strength to this foolishness that we discover the power of God.



