

The Elephant in the Room

1 Cor. 2:1-5

Don't you just love that expression, "The Elephant in the Room." There it is, just as big as you could possibly imagine, standing right there in the midst of us. It's hard to ignore. It's so huge.

Of course, we often try to ignore the elephant in the room. Men, I think, are particularly prone to that habit. We males of the species are much more likely to compartmentalize our lives, pretending to hide things in separate compartments, pretending that some of those other compartments don't really exist, or that we can actually deal with just one compartment at a time. There is a work compartment in a man's life. Then a marriage or family compartment. A church compartment. A money compartment. A sports compartment. And sadly, often, a secret or even immoral compartment. Something no one else knows anything about. And when you are involved in one compartment, you ignore all the others, even if one of them is as large as an elephant.

I don't want to be guilty of that this morning, because there is an elephant in this room. The elephant is me; or more accurately, my presence here in this pulpit. I am not your pastor. He was in this pulpit last week, as he has been almost every week for some 15 years or so. But for the next six months, you get me.

Now, in one sense, that's almost a seamless transition. I filled the pulpit here often last year. I have come to know many of you, and you have come to know me. You have been a great encouragement to me, even as you have responded well to my preaching. So almost as soon as the Session and Brent started talking about a sabbatical, they asked me if I would be able to help. But if went on this morning as if it were just another

occasion to fill the pulpit, surely I would be guilty of ignoring the elephant in the room.

I know that Brent and your session have communicated with you regarding his sabbatical. And I hope that the six months I spend here will be profitable for you as a church. I hope those months of sabbatical will be of great help and encouragement to Brent and his family. I'm thankful for the opportunity to be here among you. But none of us can ignore the reality that I am not your pastor. We can only look at that elephant and say, "There it is." That's the reality of where we are today.

Having said that, however, there is one sense in which I do want to ignore that elephant. There is one sense in which we can, and should, ignore the reality that I am here this morning, preaching to you, not your pastor. There is one sense in which it is right and appropriate to ignore that elephant in the room. It is why I chose to preach from 1 Corinthians 2 this morning. And the point of that passage is that it doesn't matter who is preaching. The identity of the man doesn't matter, for two reasons. Reason number 1, the message is the same, no matter who preaches it. It is the message of God. It is the message of the gospel. And reason number 2, very much related to that, your faith depends upon that message, not upon the man who brings it! And my motivation has to be to establish that proper foundation of your faith.

So let's ignore the elephant in the room for a few minutes, and let me read these words,

v.4 "And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

So that's why I'm here. That's why I'm preaching to you today. Not to demonstrate anything about me. But to demonstrate something about the power of God the Holy Spirit! I am not here to prove to you that I can preach. Nor do I really care if you come away thinking, "Boy, I sure wish Brent were preaching instead of him..." None of that matters. Because preaching the gospel must demonstrate the power of God, such that your faith will depend upon that power, not upon any wisdom or ability that I might or might not have as a man. So let's ignore that elephant related to the identity of the preacher, and let's focus upon what God would say to us through his word this morning.

I. THE MESSAGE OF THE PREACHER MUST BE THE MESSAGE OF GOD.

The testimony of God, according to verse 1. Some Greek manuscripts have an alternative Greek word with an alternative English translation, the mystery of God. In that case, the reference is to that which has been revealed.

God's word is a mystery, that is to say, it is given to us by revelation. We read about that in,
v.7, 10-12

With Jesus, the mystery is made known! The testimony of God is proclaimed. That's my job. That's my calling and my task. It's not a message about my own wisdom. It's not a message based upon my own ideas or my own thoughts. I am hear to declare to you the testimony of God.

And in that context, I am very unimportant. Anyone can do that, anyone can declare to you what God has said. And actually, that makes my job much easier, because I don't need to figure out what to say. I don't need to obtain any great wisdom for myself. I don't need to gain any particular knowledge or insight on my own.

I simply proclaim to you what God has said, his testimony. And the Apostle Paul has summarized so well what that testimony is. He puts it this way,

v.2 "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

So what is the difference between Scott Willet and Brent Ferry? Well, personality-wise, lots. Background, interests, hobbies—lots of differences. Brent and I often share together a joke, after the Moderator from a General Assembly several years ago repeatedly addressed me as, Mr. Ferry. So if you hear Brent address me that way, with a smile on his face, you'll understand. But other than that Moderator in his confusion, few people would find us to be that similar.

But here is one way in we are the same. Here is one way in which it doesn't matter who is in this pulpit, as long as he is committed to the very same thing that the Apostle Paul to which commits himself. It is the commitment to,

A. Proclaiming Jesus

v.2 "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

That's a personal commitment, a personal determination. It is an intellectual commitment. This is what I know, I know Jesus. This is what I believe, I believe Jesus. This is what I understand. I understand Jesus. This is what I proclaim, I proclaim Jesus.

That's it. Everything I say, everything I preach, has reference to Jesus. I'm not here to impress you with anything else, least of all, anything about me. I am completely dispensable. I am absolutely replaceable. I am unimportant. What I think doesn't matter. How I feel doesn't matter. My opinion is irrelevant. For

this is what I proclaim to you, this is what I will determine to know as I preach to you, “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

Please note in that, there is substance. There is an objective definition. When I say that I will proclaim Jesus, I don't mean that there is no content to that proclamation. I don't mean that we are all left to our own subjective emotions or personal feelings to define who Jesus is. Quite the opposite, for proclaiming Jesus means,

B. Proclaiming what Jesus did.

As Paul puts it, “Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

If I answer the question, “Who is Jesus?” I have to answer the question, “What did he do?” I'm not looking for the historical Jesus, which is a buzzword for liberal thinking that wants to talk about Jesus but not about the message of the gospel.

So who is Jesus? Jesus is the one who died for the sins of his people. Jesus is the one who satisfied the penalty and punishment of the wrath of God which our sin has earned. Jesus is the one who stands before God as my only mediator and advocate. He is the one in whom I believe, in whom I trust, so that when I stand before God, I have the benefit of everything that Jesus earned for me when he laid down his life for my sins.

I believe in Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I proclaim to Jesus, the second person of the eternal trinity, who became man, who obeyed the law fully and completely, so that his righteousness could be credited to me. I proclaim to you Jesus, in whom there is life, redemption from the curse and condemnation of death.

1 John 5:11 “And this is the testimony [that I preach]: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has

the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

Jesus died for us. Jesus was crucified to pay the penalty of sin. And that is how we who have sinned can be made right with God, by faith in that finished work of what Jesus did.

Rom. 5:8 “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. 10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. 11 And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.”

Let me emphasize something very obvious here, that for Paul to mention Jesus Christ crucified, he refers to the whole of Jesus' work, his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection! For Jesus didn't die merely as an example. He didn't die as a martyr, or as a victim. He died in order to conquer death. He died in order to be raised from the dead.

John 3:14 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

That's the message I proclaim to you as I fill this pulpit on this day so commonly called Easter. This is the gospel I preach to you, today, every day, for this is the testimony of God,

1 Cor. 15:1 "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."

That's the message. But what about the method of a preacher. I want to make up a word here, a double-compound word, in order to make my point.

II. THE METHOD OF A PREACHER MUST BE UN-SELF-CONSCIOUS.

He must be unaware of himself, and make those who hear him unaware of himself.

That's just the opposite of the wisdom of the world, isn't it? The world makes heroes out of people instantly. We have celebrity preachers just like we have celebrity athletes and celebrity singers and actors. The world thrives on celebrity. Sadly, too often, so does the church. A church easily becomes focused upon the charisma of a man. A church easily becomes identified with the personality of a man, a celebrity pastor. Especially men with obvious gifts and abilities.

And it goes against everything Paul has to say here. Paul's emphasis is actually upon,

A. The danger of a man's natural gifts.

He's actually somewhat defensive here, defending himself against the rise of divisions within the church at Corinth, divisions defined by leaders, men who had become popular. And he had become one of those men, one of the points of contention,

1 Cor. 1:11 "For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."

Paul rejects that situation, and he does so by denying his own prominence or preeminence.

v.1

Further, v.4

It's a negative recommendation, isn't it?

Imagine if we applied that to the work of the average pulpit committee? Imagine a group of people in a church listening to sermon tapes as they consider calling a pastor, and turning a man down because he spoke too well, that he had too much wisdom. He was just too good a speaker to be an effective pastor.

I still remember the times I had to preach in my homiletics class in seminary, only to receive the review and critique of the pastor immediately after the sermon. I never heard the critique that I was too good a speaker. I heard some other critiques, but I never heard that one! I never heard the critique that I had too much wisdom.

Yet, actually, I'm not criticizing the right use of training for preachers. These verses aren't an excuse for bad preaching! These verses aren't an excuse for a lazy pastor's refusal to study

hard and prepare well. Verse 1 is not an exhortation to be boring when you preach. Verse 4 is not a requirement that would forbid a preacher from given an exhortation or to urge his listeners to respond.

But these verse do demonstrate the great danger of a man relying upon himself! The great danger of a man depending upon his own natural gifts, be they in the form of eloquence or intellectual capacity.

Have you ever listened to a preacher and come away thinking, “He’s just trying to show how smart he is.” Or, “He’s drawing too much attention to himself. He’s just showing off his own gifts and abilities?”

That’s the danger Paul is addressing, and it is very, very real. There is a danger when a man has abilities to speak well, and the danger is that he forgets that not only is the message all about Jesus, but so is the method.

God doesn’t need the eloquence of men to spread the gospel. God doesn’t need the intelligence or the wisdom of a man to spread the gospel. God doesn’t need our methods or our techniques. Instead, he utilizes what Paul calls the “foolishness of preaching.”

1 Cor. 1:20 “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both

Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

So no extravagant display of wisdom. No self-conscious demonstration of eloquence. The method of a preacher must be un-self-conscious. And in that context, we see,

B. The power of a man’s weakness.

Paul’s contrast is as startling as it could be.

v.3

Weakness, fear, trembling.

When I first began to preach, I knew what that was all about. I was very young, and I was very terrified. Scared to death. Part of that passed away as I grew accustomed to preaching, confident of God’s calling upon my life. But part of that is something that should remain! Weakness, fear, trembling. Not self-confidence, self-reliance, self-assurance.

This is a crucial lesson for all of us to learn, not just preachers, but all Christians. God would have us learn not just the humility of weakness, but the strength of weakness. The power of weakness.

Paul would later write this of himself and his ministry,

2 Cor. 4:7 “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard- pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may

be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So then death is working in us, but life in you.”

Even more personally,

2 Cor. 12:7 “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, “ My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

The power of a man's weakness! You won't learn that reading a book! You won't learn that in the midst of outward success and prosperity. You won't learn that if you indulge pride and self-reliance. You will learn that from Jesus. “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

That's the method for godly preaching. Weakness. Foolishness. Un-self-consciousness. It has nothing to do with me. It has everything to do with the power of God. And if I am going to get there as a preacher, then I have to have the same motive as Paul defines for us.

III. THE MOTIVATION OF A PREACHER MUST BE THE BUILDING OF YOUR FAITH.

That's what I mean, “It's not about me.” In fact, it's about you. It's about your faith, your strength, your maturity. Your walk with the Lord.

But what does that mean? It means that we must be committed to the idea that,

A. The foundation of your faith should never be in a man.

On the surface, that's easy to agree with. But in reality, it is way too easy to do just that, to become dependent upon someone else. A pastor. An author. A conference speaker. A seminary professor. An elder. A TV evangelist. I've seen it all, each one of those situations. I've seen churches started and explode with popularity, because of the popularity of a pastor. I've seen churches crippled, even brought to an end, because of a man's unfaithfulness, or because he moved on, or simply because he retired or died. Let's face it, it is far too easy to become dependent upon a man.

Paul's purpose was stated explicitly, as clearly as it could be. His motivation was plain. Especially in the situation at Corinth, where there was so much division, he wanted to be sure that no one was depending upon him instead of depending upon God.

He did not emphasize his own eloquence or wisdom, but stressed his weakness. So that he would never become the foundation of the faith of those who heard him. Even as an apostle, he would not be the foundation for the faith of others. His strength would not be what others should rely upon.

I should ask you to be sure that is true of you as well, for,

B. The foundation of your faith must be in the power of God.

Again, that is not a doctrinal proposition that you can memorize. That is not something you can read in a book. This is where you have to live. Not just enduring weakness, but when you are weak, learning to trust in God's power to keep you and to

sustain you.

Remember Paul's thorn in the flesh, that seemingly constant reminder of his weakness? God didn't take it away, despite Paul's pleading for him to do so. God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." And Paul replied, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

When you are weak, you learn to depend upon God. When you are weak, when you learn that your strength is insufficient, you learn that God's grace is sufficient. God's strength in you, in me, is made perfect and complete when we are made weak.

That's true of preaching. That's true of life.

So how strong are you? Maybe I should ask, "How weak are you?"

Are you weak enough so that you will stop trying to depend upon your own strength? That's a lesson I have had to learn. A lesson I'm still learning.

Are you weak enough so that your faith will have to find its foundation in the power of God?

As I preach to you over these next six months, Lord willing, this will be my goal, that as I preach Jesus Christ and him crucified, as I minister Jesus to you, publicly and from house to house, that more and more, your faith would rest upon the power of God.

Jesus died. Jesus was raised from the dead. So that you who believe in him might have everlasting life. And when you are weak, it is then that you will be able to learn that his grace is sufficient even for you.