

# 16<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF PENTECOST |

## SERMON

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 | Luke 16:19-31 | September 29, 2019 | Rev. Catherine Healy | Church of St. Paul & the Redeemer

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When I served as a youth pastor, I had a wonderful mentor who taught me the practice of giving each young person a book of the Bible that was all their own. He would read through it with them and sometimes their parents, and would write them a letter explaining why he had chosen that book for them. *I know you've been struggling to feel the love of God, he would say, so I want you to read Romans. Or: You have a passion for justice, so for you, I'm choosing Amos. Or: You're new to the story of Jesus, so we're going to read the Gospel of Mark.*

This summer, as I thought about our fall formation series, I remembered him and wondered: What do the Scriptures have to say to an urban church that has just undergone a major leadership transition? What would I choose if I were giving a single book of the Bible to SPR?

This study note, from a Bible off my shelf, helped me decide:

*Corinth was an important city in Greece. Its harbor for ships made it an excellent place for doing business ... Military leaders liked to retire in this city of wealthy and smart people. But Corinth was also known for having temples to many gods and for widespread sin.*

*Acts 18:1-18 tells how Paul started the church in Corinth and taught the new Christians there for a year and a half. After he*

*left, those Christians began to ... [argue] about the right way to worship God.*

*Paul wrote this letter to correct his friends in Corinth. He reminded them that God is wiser than all of them. He told them to quit taking sides in unimportant arguments ... He also explained how God's Spirit gives spiritual gifts to help Christians grow. But Paul's most important message was love.<sup>1</sup>*

So it turns out that we are not the first urban church to face a transition in leadership. The Christians in Corinth were sophisticated. They had strong, often opposing opinions about how the church should be. They argued with each other, and they brought a lot of intellectual firepower to their arguments. Their gifts, and their challenges, were startlingly similar to ours.

Over the next five weeks, we will be breaking with the lectionary<sup>2</sup> and taking a deep dive into the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. There are several ways to jump in: You can, of course, come to church to hear the sermons; you can come to adult formation at 10:20 each Sunday to look at the text through a more academic lens; and you can join a small group—the Sunday groups will be meeting at 11:15 and 12:45 today.

The purpose of this enterprise is not to make us more knowledgeable, although that will no doubt be a byproduct.

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory note on 1 Corinthians from the Deep Blue Kids' Bible, a CEB (Common English Bible) translation with notes that are helpful for both children and adults. Never underestimate a good children's Bible!

<sup>2</sup> We normally determine which Bible passages will be read each week by consulting the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) (RCL), which many denominations share. Over the next five weeks, our Old Testament, Psalm, and Gospel readings will stick to the RCL—only the New Testament readings will change.

Instead, we are reading this book together in hopes that it can teach us something about living more fully into the beautiful will of God.

What does it mean for us to be the people of God, in this time, in this place—both broadly, in the United States, and narrowly, here at SPR? With so many possibilities before us, how should we continue to discern what God wants us to do?

The Corinthians were asking the same questions. And Paul begins his letter by warning them: If you really commit to this project of following Jesus, you are going to take a hit to your pride, because people are going to think you are a fool.

The message about the cross sounds like foolishness.<sup>3</sup> The idea that an ineffable God could become incarnate, in the form of a person who was both fully God and fully human, and that this person could be murdered and rise from the dead, and that this means we, too, somehow have the power to overcome death?

It's not our postmodern worldview that makes this a hard sell. It always has been.<sup>4</sup> Paul knows this, because he was not always a believer himself.

The Corinthians' identity is tied up in being cultured and wise. But something is drawing them to the crucified and resurrected Christ, even though they are still influenced by a society that tells them that devoutly religious people are not all that smart, and casually religious people are smarter, and people who have transcended the need for faith are the smartest of all—another idea that turns out not to be new.

So Paul writes to the Corinthians and asks them: Are you willing to devote your life to Christ, even if it makes people think you're stupid?

Could you let yourself know God, and be fully known, even if it will change your life in ways you may not want?

Could you listen to God's call, even if God is calling you to a vocation that will disappoint your family? Even if God is calling you to a set of values that alienates you from your friends?

The wisdom of the world is about accruing credentials and money and power. Paul cautions that none of those things matter very much in the end.

Instead, God values what is low and despised in the world—a message that Paul takes directly from Jesus.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a cautionary tale, addressed to "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money."<sup>5</sup> It's not exactly an argument against power and wealth. Instead, it's a warning that power and wealth are not a measure of how much you are favored by God.

The rich man embodies the wisdom of the world to a cartoonish degree. He could not possibly be more obvious with his wealth.<sup>6</sup> Nobody needs to feast sumptuously every day.

Just outside his gate is the beggar Lazarus, covered in sores. The rich man can't be all that ignorant of Lazarus' plight, because he knows his name.

Only when it's too late does it occur to the rich man that there might be more to life than money and power. But even then, it never occurs to him to ask Lazarus for forgiveness. Even in the afterlife, in the midst of torment, he still thinks that Lazarus owes something to him.

As Christian believers, we are called to a different life: the wisdom of God, which is the foolishness of the world. Like Jesus, we are called "not to be served, but to serve."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus gives us the *why* of that different life. Paul, for better and sometimes for worse, tries to give us the *how*.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 1:18.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis uses this as an argument for the faith: "Reality, in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed. That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity ... It is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up" (*Mere Christianity*, p. 31).

<sup>5</sup> Luke 16:14.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see Amy-Jill Levine, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," in *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45.

I look forward to the next month, as we explore the *how* of life in community together. It's going to be a wild ride.