

What Do You Know? 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

The past few Sundays we have heard much about the message of the cross and the power we can receive from it. To paraphrase an old gospel song, there is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb that was shed on Calvary. There is power to free us from the burden of sin and power to free us from our passion and our pride. This morning we are going to look at a slightly different kind of power, power that comes from knowledge.

Knowledge is power. The great Swiss psychologist Piaget taught that human knowledge is gained in three basic ways: physically, logically and socially. John Wesley might choose the words experience, reason and tradition. For example, throughout history, there is a social tradition where wise adults tell unknowing children to stay away from a hot fire or a hot stove to avoid getting a painful burn. For some kids, they learn by physically touching the flames or the stove for themselves, leading to a reasonable and logical conclusion that yes, mom or dad was right. Others, after seeing their brother or sister get burned, come to a logical and reasonable conclusion that hot stoves can cause painful burns. Others simply believe to what mom told them about hot stoves to begin with. Knowledge helps us from causing harm to ourselves and to others, and it also helps us to do what is right and good.

Knowledge is power. It's not known who first spoke or penned those words, but Thomas Jefferson held them near to his heart, especially when it came to education. Writing to his dear friend and slave owner John Taylor, he said "*[Northeastern] seminaries are no longer proper for Southern or Western students. The signs of the times admonish us to call them home. If knowledge is power, we should look to its advancement at home, where no resource of power will be unwanted*".

He was concerned that the anti-slavery teachings of the universities of the Northeast would spread to the Southern states. Jefferson recognized the battle for the mind often begins in the classroom. Then and now, educational institutions from nursery school to post graduate schools do much more than teach the three "r's. They also have great influence in shaping the attitudes and opinions of society on a variety of things, including deeply divisive social issues.

In Jefferson's day it was slavery that divided the country and for that matter the church. Yet knowledge did little to solve the problem. He and many others knew slavery to be morally and ethically wrong. They knew from witnessing the senseless beatings and hearing the cries of anguish and abuse from slaves that it was wrong to kidnap a segment of society for personal gain and take them away from their homes, their families and their dignity. Logically they knew something wasn't quite right for a fellow living breathing human being to be considered chattel, a piece of property to be bought, sold and abused at will. They knew it was wrong to be subjected to a lifetime of forced labor because of ethnic heritage or skin color. But socially it was much different. Depending upon educational background, the area of the country, political views of the role of government in the affairs of individual states, and socio-economic status, slavery was either hated, promoted, accepted or tolerated. In Jefferson's case, it seemed to be the latter. Judging by his writings, he considered the rights of individual states to decide the issue for themselves was far more important than the moral issue of right and wrong.

Education is vitally important in all cultures and societies. Unless we know how to read, write and do simple arithmetic our ability to communicate, earn a living and manage our finances is severely hindered. However, even the most educated of the world will go astray without a different kind of knowledge, a better kind of knowledge, a supreme kind of knowledge. In our Scripture text this morning it is referred to as the wisdom of God. What exactly is it? How will we know if we have it?

God has a much different way of teaching than humanity does.

Divine knowledge is not something that can be gained physically, logically or socially. It is not something we can see with our eyes or touch with our fingers or obtain from a book or power point slide or protest demonstration. It is not something we can figure out using logic and reason. It is not something subject to opinions and biases of culture. We don't even need to know how to read or write in order to receive it. Like all of God's gifts to us, the divine wisdom of God is not something we earn or deserve but something we receive by grace that changes our lives and our society.

Historians tell us that the evils of chattel slavery began hundreds of years ago with Arab traders in the Middle East. Widespread physical knowledge of its atrocities was not enough to overcome it. Human wisdom, reason, rhetoric and logic were powerless to overcome it. It certainly wasn't overcome by social knowledge and other wisdom of the world. It was a different kind of knowledge, a higher kind of knowledge, a supreme kind of wisdom that eventually brought the truth to light that slavery was an evil practice that needed to cease. That kind of wisdom and knowledge is not learned in the classrooms from teachers or professors or even through civil rights leaders. It's not learned in the church from pastors or Sunday School teachers. The wisdom of God is received in the mystical realm and learned from a very different kind of teacher, the Holy Spirit through the message of the cross.

The puzzling thing is that the message of the cross is simple enough for even the most illiterate of people to understand but so very difficult for the learned. The apostle Paul was a highly educated person in the ways of the world and the ways of God. St Luke records in Acts 20:27 that Paul "expounded the whole counsel of God to the early church. He knew his stuff! He was the teacher of teachers. He knew the Scriptures inside and out, he knew what he was talking about physically, logically and socially. Yet he still had a problem. He considered the message of the cross to be a stumbling block. It was beneath his dignity to believe that the long-awaited Messiah would have died a criminal's death. He was in love with the majesty of the law rather than the majesty of the One who came to fulfill it.

It wasn't until He encountered the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus that He "saw the light" and recognized the truth. At that moment everything else he had learned in life became secondary to this divine knowledge that Christ gave up everything, including His dignity and His life, to be crucified and save sinners, sinners like himself. The message of the cross is powerful.

Verse 2- For I decided (determined) to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. What a wonderful working definition of divine wisdom. He goes on in verse 9 to quote Isaiah 64:4. We know from verse 10 and beyond that he is not writing about the things God has prepared for us in heaven but the things we can have here on earth, things with power to change hearts and change lives, things that come from the wisdom of God given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Harry Hosier was one who had that power. He was the first black Methodist preacher in history. He was a slave, illiterate, unable to read or write. He was freed after the American Revolution, and acquired the surname Hoosier, a less than flattering term referring to a hick, a farmer, a hayseed, someone of low social status. He eventually found himself employed as a carriage driver for a white man named Francis Asbury, one of the early founders and bishop of the American Methodist church. Asbury began to teach him about the Scriptures and Jesus Christ and soon Hosier was “warming up the crowds” before Asbury spoke. Eventually the crowds wanted to hear Hosier instead of Asbury. Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, often said to be one of the most brilliant men in early America, called Hosier the greatest preacher in America. Although Hosier needed to know the things that Asbury taught him, the response to his messages reveal it was the things he learned from the Holy Spirit that as the most important. What we know matters. So, what do we know? I pray it is the message of the cross. **It should always lead to a conversation about who we know, Jesus and Jesus crucified, the One who loves us so.**
Amen