

Sermon for January 20, 2018

1 Corinthians 2:1–5 (NIV84)

Theme: **What you can expect at Divine Word.**

1. Expect to find a pastor and people in desperate need of God's grace.
2. Expect to hear the message Jesus Christ and him crucified.

¹ When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Here I am, preaching my first sermon at Divine Word. How do I feel? A little scared. Why? Because I know myself. I am not the great orator people may want me to be; nor am I any sort of visionary. I am not as smart as people might think. I struggle with all sorts of sins like laziness, selfishness and pride. If I were to summarize who I am in one sentence, it would be this: I am a man in desperate need of God's grace.

But it's for this reason that I prayerfully hope to be the pastor you need: not the guy who has all the answers to all your problems, but one who can direct you to the cross, because he has been there so many times before. This is the kind of pastor I prayerfully desire to be for you. Why? Because, as our sermon text reveals, this is the kind of ministry that glorifies God.

With the Apostle Paul as our guide, let us prayerfully consider **what people can expect when they come to Divine Word Evangelical Lutheran Church:** 1) You can expect to find a pastor and people in desperate need of God's grace. 2) You can expect to hear the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Part One: You can expect to find a pastor and people in desperate need of God's grace.

Our sermon text is part of a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to Christians in Corinth, while he was ministering

in

Ephesus.

Corinth was a rather large city in the ancient world. Some estimate its population at around 700,000, filled with people from almost every known race and nationality on the earth. Yes, the city was rich in culture and finance, but it also had its problems. One commentator described Corinth as a place where the sensuality of the East met the brutality of the West. Even ancient pagan writers seemed to have been taken aback by the city's wild lifestyle – so much so that the Greeks coined a verb on the basis of the city's immorality and name: To *corinthianize*, meant “to practice fornication.”

I can just imagine how intimidating the idea of conducting ministry in that city must have been for the apostle Paul. Where would he begin? What would he say? If the people of Athens laughed him out of their city, what would the even more godless Corinthians do? From what we can gather from Scripture, Paul's anxiety seems to have been so strong that the LORD found it necessary to reassure him by means of a vision.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: the LORD has called all of us to represent him in Ottawa – a city that is even more populous and culturally diverse than ancient Corinth. Thankfully, Ottawa does not have the ignoble reputation of Corinth. As I understand, Ottawa is both a safe place to live and a great place to bring up a family.

Still, because Ottawa is such a diverse and populous city, the thought of evangelizing it can seem overwhelming. From what I understand, people here put a high value on education, tolerance and expertise. Does this mean we need to become more charming and educated to entice people to our church? Do we need to change our doctrine in order to become more attractive to the modern ear? Would emphasizing social justice be the best way to garner the attention of our community?

Similar ideas seem to have been in the minds of the Christians in Corinth, prompting the Apostle Paul to write them this letter. According to the verses preceding our text, it seems as if the Corinthians were starting to act as if human wisdom, tolerance and rhetoric were of far greater value than preaching the seemingly “simplistic” story of Jesus. In doing this, they were starting to forget why they existed as a church. They were forgetting the Gospel.

And aren't we, at times, also tempted to do the same? With all the emphasis the world around us puts on earthly wisdom, tolerance and human advancement, don't we sometimes feel that we need to do something more than merely point people to Christ? Aren't we all tempted to think that the Gospel will sound either offensive or foolish to outsiders, so it's up to us to make it more attractive by how we word things?

Yes, the temptation to think this way is very real. But here's the thing: God doesn't call us to change

hearts. That's an impossible job – one that only Holy Spirit himself can do. No, the only thing the LORD wants us to do regarding evangelism is use our words and actions to faithfully confess his Gospel in love – the Gospel he himself gave us, and by which we alone are saved.

For this very reason, you won't find super-humans at Divine Word, ready to wow you with their rhetoric and answers to all of life's problems. Rather, what you will find is a group of loving people who (like everyone else in this world) still struggle with sin, guilt and doubt, and are in desperate need of God's grace.

If you realize this about yourself, then you are in good company, because the apostle Paul felt the same way. This is why he reminded the Corinthians that he came to them *in weakness and fear, and with much trembling*. The great apostle Paul was keenly aware of his own limitations. He was a sinner who deserved nothing from God, and could do nothing apart from him. But the LORD graciously saved Paul. Constantly confessing this truth is what made Paul such an effective preacher. In a letter addressed to his coworker Timothy, the apostle Paul once wrote: *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.* (1 Timothy 1:15,16 NIV84) Yes, the Gospel of God's great love for Paul in Christ is what changed him from being a person who fought against the LORD into a man who loved God and did all he could for him. And if that simple message could do that for someone who considered himself the worst of sinners, imagine what it could do for others.

Like Paul, we have a great and intimidating mission ahead of us. The people in our city are spiritually hurting and in desperate need of help. But we are mere mortals – sinners ourselves who deserve nothing good from God. Realizing this, we don't rely on ourselves to bring about any great revival in this city. Rather, we place our confidence in Christ and the simple message of him crucified. Why? Because the Holy Spirit has constantly used this message in the past to miraculously save both us and others. Only he has the power to change hearts, and he only chooses to do so through the proclamation of this Gospel. More than that, he chooses to proclaim that message through sinners like you and me – people who are in constant need of his grace, so that they can easily lead others to it. For this reason, people who come to Divine Word will not find a museum of ideal saints and hear pep talks on how they can become better people. What they will see and hear, rather, is the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified - for it alone has the power to save.

Part Two: Expect to hear the message Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Yes, when the apostle Paul came to Corinth, the LORD allowed him to see through all the overwhelming problems and sins of that city in order to focus on their greatest need: their separation from God due to their

sin. From this one great, spiritual problem, all their other problems flowed: idolatry, sexual immorality, violence . . . you name it! But, by the grace of God, the apostle Paul had the very message that would change their relationship with God forever: Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

“But,” someone might wonder, “what, exactly, is this message of Christ crucified and how does it help me, my neighbors and my city?” The message of Christ crucified is the message of the entire Bible, which (first of all) reveals to us our greatest problem: that our sins against God’s commandments have separated us from him and incurred his wrath and punishment. Because of sin, our natures have become completely corrupt. We can’t change ourselves, nor restore our lost relationship with God on our own. We need a Savior.

Thankfully, the message of Christ crucified doesn’t leave us in the lurch. The whole purpose of this message is to point us to the Savior we need. The message of Christ crucified is the announcement of the wonderful fact that God loved and pitied us to such a degree that he sent his only Son into the world to become just like us in order to graciously save us. Jesus kept God’s holy law in our place and suffered the death we deserved for our sins. And after Jesus accomplished this for us, God raised him up from the grave – proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that he has paid for our sins in full and reconciled us to God. Yes, the message of Christ crucified proclaims how God mercifully saved us from the guilt, death and hell our sins had earned, in order to declare us to be his dearly loved sons and daughters through faith in him. The message of Christ crucified changes who we are – allowing us to live in the confidence that the almighty God loves us.

And why does the message of Christ crucified accomplish such amazing things? Because God promises that his Word will never return to him empty, but always accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it. The Holy Spirit is so closely tied to the message of Christ crucified that we can be confident that he is there, making His word work every time it is proclaimed. For this reason, when Paul was scared about the great challenges that faced him in Corinth, God came to him and said, “*Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.*” (Acts 18:9,10 NIV84) Paul believed God’s promise, and the Holy Spirit did what he said.

Did you know that God has also made a similar promise to us? As we keep on proclaiming Christ crucified, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit is working through us. How so? Because He says so in his Word. For this reason we can confidently confess with the apostle Paul: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.* (Romans 1:16 NIV84)

What can you expect when you come to Divine Word? You can expect to find a pastor who is sinful and

weak. He does not have any grand vision for the Church, nor will he be able to wow you with his learning and rhetoric. But, by the grace of God, there is one thing that he will always do: point you to Christ, and the message of him crucified. Why? Because God commanded him to do this. Christ crucified is the only message that matters. It is the only message that saves. Focusing on Christ, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will work through His Word and Sacraments to accomplish everything He desires. He will both strengthen our faith in him and guide our evangelism efforts as we proclaim his truth in love.

Yes, may the LORD ever keep our attention completely focused on this powerful message. Through it the LORD will overcome every challenge that faces us and bring about the salvation of every soul in this city that he has lovingly chosen as his own – all to the glory of his name. Amen.