

## 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 “Is it Really That Simple?”

When I was going to seminary in Johnson City, Tennessee back in the early 90s, there was a church not far from the Eastern Tennessee State University campus called Grandview Christian Church. Grandview Christian Church was a Stone-Campbell movement church like ours, but they don't have “Disciples of Christ” in parentheses like our church, nor do they fly a red chalice with a St. Andrew's cross either. Think of the Christian Churches as cousins who don't always see eye-to-eye with each other. The kind that you can sit peacefully and eat quietly with at the same table so long as you don't talk religion or politics.

Anyway, Grandview Christian Church in Johnson City, Tennessee is one of four major Christian churches in the greater Johnson City metropolitan area. I say “major” because there are literally *dozens* of Christian Churches in and around the city. Now, population-wise, Johnson City has about 20,000 people less than Chico. And if you're like me, you might be thinking, “Why would there be four major Christian Churches in a town of only 66,000?” Because each of these churches in Johnson City has their own “flavor.” Downtown Christian Church is ... well ... a downtown church. It's a good mix of people who live near downtown. Nothing fancy ... no frills ... very practical. Then there's Boone's Mill Christian Church. Remember how Donny and Marie Osmond used to sing about being “A Little Bit Country, and a Little Bit Rock and Roll?” Boone's Mill is the country church. Central Christian Church, on the other hand, is the Rock and Roll Church. Grandview? Grandview is the scholarly church. This is the church where many of the faculty from Emmanuel School of Religion and Milligan College went. So imagine, if you will, what it would be like to be a seminary student at Emmanuel doing an internship at Grandview Christian Church. How do you think it would feel to get up and preach in front of most of your professors *plus* a bunch of other faculty from Milligan College and ETSU? I'll never know, because I did my supervised ministerial experience at a little Disciples Church up in Pearisburg, Virginia. And thank God for that.

My friend Aaron Wymer, on the other hand, was the lucky guy who got to work at Grandview. And here's the thing about Aaron ... he was smart. He was a great student. He worked hard and had good grades. But he wasn't what I would call a "scholar." He was not on the track for being a seminary professor ... he was called to be a pastor. But still ... that first time in the Grandview pulpit was intimidating for him. How'd it work for him? Well, not long after he graduated, he became the Senior Pastor there, and he's held that position for almost quarter of a century now! I'd say it worked out pretty well. But I wonder if he still feels a little nervous or intimidated when he gets up in the pulpit even after 24 years? According to one of my clergy mentors, that's not a bad thing at all. It means you understand your prophetic responsibility. But still. All those professors and Bible scholars? Whew!

Ever been in that position before? In a place where you feel like you're in over your head? Ever feel like you're the rookie baseball player out on the field playing with the super-stars and hall-of-famers? I've been there for sure. I felt that way when I was called to be the Associate Regional Minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Virginia. I stood in awe of Marilyn Taylor, the director of Women's Ministries. I thought, "I'm going to look like a clown working with someone of that caliber!" And you know what ... you'd think that as you get older you'd develop more confidence in your abilities and not be intimidated so easily. But I've got to confess, the whole time Katy Valentine was here, I think I only preached from the Epistles a handful of times! She's a Pauline scholar for crying out loud ... who am I to preach from Paul's epistles when Katy's around?! I'd look at the lectionary, and I'd be like, Prophets? Meh. Nothing here. Psalm? Kind of a weird this week. Not sure this speaks to me. Gospel? Oh dear heavens, the Prodigal Son again? No thanks. How about the Epistle? Hmmm. Time to think about that Psalm again.

Here's the thing though ... Katy is a great scholar but more than anything else, she's an awesome human being. Come to find out she felt

a little intimidated stepping into the pulpit the first few times she did. I thought, “Why?!” She said, “I’m not used to preaching. I don’t feel like I know what I’m doing. You prepare a sermon every week ... week after week ... all year, every year. How do you do that?” I’m like, “How in the world do *you* dig into the epistles ... in *Greek* no less ... and write academic papers for scholars in Norway to pick apart?!” The conclusion we both came to is, “It’s just what we do.” And more importantly, it’s not about us. It’s about God working through us.

This is what’s happening here in our text this morning, which I might add *is* from the Epistles (and Katy *is* here.) Paul came to Corinth feeling like he had nothing to offer. Corinth was a hub of scholarship in that part of the world for many years. Although it wasn’t as legendary as Athens as far as its reputation for scholarship goes, Corinth was definitely in the big leagues when it came to the philosophers and orators of the day. Paul said “I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.” He said, “I came to you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.” Now, to be fair, Paul was like my friend Aaron - a pretty smart guy. He could hold his own in the persuasive address and argumentation department. He just didn’t feel like he could compare to the intellectual giants that the Corinthians were accustomed to. But also to be fair, I need to give Paul credit for being aware of how foolish his message probably sounded to the Corinthians.

In verse 2, Paul claims that the only thing he came to town with is “Jesus crucified.” Talking about Jesus as being in any way important was already a stretch for these sophisticated, educated Corinthians. Why in the world should they care about some failed Messiah from some backwoods Roman province? To make it even worse, Paul talks about Jesus *crucified*. You think talking about religion and politics at the dinner table is trashy? Talking about people who were tortured to death and nailed on a cross is much worse. In the Roman world, people knew what crucifixion was and what it stood for, but you’re not supposed to talk about it. It’s disgusting. And yet, here’s Paul saying, “All I came to talk about is Jesus crucified!” That’s a pretty courageous decision on his

part. Again, he's perfectly capable of speaking about the gospel in terms of deep wisdom, but he made it a point to speak plainly ... even to the point of being crude. He's really putting himself out there as far as exposing himself to the kind of humiliation that he'd likely face from people who are considered sophisticated academics. It would be like my friend Aaron standing at the Grandview Christian Church pulpit in front of all those intellectuals, cracking open a Bud Light and saying, "Whoooo-weee ... Boy have I got a gross story to tell y'all!"

Now ... let's back up a little, because I don't want to give you the impression that Paul was the first century equivalent to Jeff Foxworthy. Paul was much smarter than that. See, Paul didn't want to present the way of Jesus as just another complex, intriguing philosophy for the detached academic sophisticates to talk about. Jesus is way more important than that. Back in chapter one, if you remember, Paul said that God's foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of the world. So Paul *isn't* saying that there is no wisdom here in this apparent crude simplicity. He says it's, "God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory." This wisdom of God, secret and hidden as it may be, is not understood by any of the rulers of this age. Because if any of *them* had understood it, they wouldn't have allowed Jesus to be crucified in the first place.

What Paul seems to be saying here is that when we rely too much on the wisdom of the world to figure out the most important mysteries of the universe, we lose touch with the simplicity of the message. When it comes to preaching the Good News of Christ, we almost always end up looking in all the wrong places and missing the whole point. And we do that in the church today too! We in the church are guilty of complicating matters of faith! We look to all these complex atonement theories and verbal plenary inspiration of the scriptures, and convoluted distinctions between justification and sanctification, and endless debates about predestination and premillennial eschatology. But Paul is saying, "Listen ... if we *start* here with all this intellectual acrobatics, we're missing the point!" The fundamental mysteries of the universe are *not*

complicated! In fact, they're given to us as gifts. God gave Jesus to us as ... a ... gift! Same goes for the Holy Spirit. It's a gift. Same with love and mercy and hope. All of them are gifts. And all these gifts reveal the same thing: The great mystery that has been hidden by our own blindness since the foundation of the world, the great mystery that God loves us, deeply and passionately and overwhelmingly; the great mystery that God really-really likes you; that God looks at you and bursts into love-song singing, "Yes! How wonderful you are. Come dance with me, you who are beloved from the foundation of the earth." God looks at you and thinks, "I love you so much I'd willingly die for you."

"Oh no," we say. That's silly. It *can't* be that simple. No, we need a complex religious system full of sacred rituals and profound liturgies! Surely we need to know how many angels can fit on the head of a pin and how many wings the seraphim have! Surely we need a religious legal code to meticulously define the line between holiness and sinfulness and be able to police it fiercely. Has not the Torah given us 613 commandments and not one jot or tittle shall disappear from the law until all is accomplished? Isn't that what Jesus said?

Yes. But he also said that those 613 tertiary laws can be summed up in two very simple commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." That's it. No way! It *couldn't* be that simple! I mean, who is your neighbor? "Look ... everyone is your neighbor. Just love them. And if it's still not clear, then just follow me. Do as I do. Love everyone else the way I have loved you. That's all there is to it. Just love 'em. They will know that you are my followers by your love. Not by your grasp of atonement theories. By your love. The deepest mysteries of the universe come down to one simple word that even a child can understand. Love. It *is* that simple. Really."