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1 Corinthians 2:1-12
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Archaeologists unearthed the ancient city of Corinth, and we can see clearly that it was a bustling, exciting time for that city...Trade was flourishing. The economy was booming. Intellectual giants from all over the world came there to teach. It was the great marketplace of ideas. It was the zenith of culture, and in such a place, Paul to very brilliant, successful people said, *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. We might want to pull Paul aside and whisper in his ear and say, "Well, you might know a few other things besides just Jesus Christ and him crucified. I mean, to make a church happen, you've got to know about buildings and you've got to know about budgets, and you've got to understand church people. They just don't want to know about Jesus Christ and him crucified. They want a few little tips on how to succeed in the world. They want a few little hints on how to have a happy life. They want a few little guidelines on how to have a successful marriage." But Paul said *I resolved to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

I suspect that Paul knew that the Corinthians, like us, would learn about these things elsewhere, buildings, budgets and how to get ahead in the world, little formulas to have a happy life. Paul wanted to give us something deeper, something better, something more profound, something more enduring, something that would work on the days that you're broke, something that would lift you up on the days that you're sad or depressed or alone, if a marriage hasn't worked, and try as you might, you just don't feel any happiness in your soul. During those days, we know Jesus Christ and him crucified. God has not left us alone. And I suspect if we don't know how to know God during those dark days, we'll never discover the true joy, that immense happiness that God offers to us. Instead, we always know something that's a little bit thin and superficial.

Jesus was crucified on a cross. It would have been made out of olive wood, and you think about the nature of olive wood, it's impossible to take olive wood and make it into something that is very, very smooth and straight because olive, by its nature, is a twisted, knotted kind of wood. I imagine that the wood that Jesus was crucified on, they just thought he was just one more base person to be crucified. I imagine that cross as not being smooth at all. I imagine it as being gnarled and twisted, and I imagine in God's great wisdom that that gnarled cross becomes a twisted question mark against all of our world's values. Our world has a way of arranging things, but the cross calls it all into question. Then the cross takes our illusions of grandeur, our sense of achievement, all that we have marshaled for ourselves and calls it into question because the cross leads us to be humble. Humble. Humble. It happened for the poor Christians in the Corinthian church. We know that one of the members of that church – and there must have been 50 or 60 members at the time that Paul wrote this letter to them – out of that number of people, one of the members – we know his name – his name was Erastus. He was a very wealthy, important city official. Archaeologists have found a street that he paid to have paved himself. There's an inscription with his name on it – "Erastus made this street". He found himself in church with slaves and mere peasants and laborers. In their world, wealthy people

like Erastus never socialized with slaves – well, it doesn't happen in our world either – slaves were mere peasants. And Paul doesn't come to Corinth to say, "Here's the way to move up from becoming a slave and becoming a wealthy guy like Erastus." Instead, Paul says, "We're all one in Christ." We all have the same problems. We all have the same destiny – it's humbling. Paul says that he knows the Cross of Christ so that *Your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God* – so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God, the wisdom of men. Sometimes I think we're just too smart for our own good.

I went to Haiti about a month ago and we made the journey from Port Au Prince, the airport back in the middle of nowhere, to Bayonnais. The people there knew that we were coming and so they just sort of gathered there in this field, and we drove up – you know, it's like the white North Americans have come – and we got out of the vehicle and many people were taking photos and all, and the best photo was taken right at that moment. Amilor, the minister there, has a little infant son, and he handed me the child. The child – it was like he was posing for the picture – looked me right in the eye and people snapped photos and at that point Amilor said, "His name is James Smart." People contemplated this, and the Haitians said "So that means you're James Not Smart." And everywhere I went, I'd be walking around and they would say "Hi, James Not Smart." It was great to be James Not Smart.

Sometimes we're so smart, aren't we? It's a problem. A friend of mine one time clipped a cartoon and sent it to me and said "This reminded me of you." And this got on my nerves because the cartoon has a guy sitting at his desk and the caption says "I am so smart I make myself sick." We're so smart. We've got the world all figured out. We know how to get ahead. We've got our ideologies arranged. We are so smart. We are so smart we even argue with God, don't we? Or we are so smart that we know what must be true, and if there's something in the Bible where God doesn't match that, then we're not too sure – we're smarter than God Almighty. There are two Bibles on the market, and you should not buy them. Isn't that something, a pastor saying "Don't buy a Bible." There's one Bible you most definitely should not buy. It's a PC Bible. It's politically correct. It always adds inclusive language and makes the Bible where God never appeared to say anything to ever offend anybody at all. You should not buy this Bible. It's pathetic. They've retranslated everything so it's politically correct. Do not buy this Bible. Now there's another Bible. Maybe you've read about it – it's the conservative Bible, and the conservative Bible retranslated everything, there's nothing in there that appears at all liberal. There's nothing in there about diversity or inclusiveness or anything – it's the conservative Bible. Do not buy this Bible. You see, the premise in all of these is we've got the world figured out, we liberals or we conservatives, and we're even going to bend God's word to our purposes for surely, God meant what we have figured out – we're so smart.

Paul says that the Gospel rests not on the wisdom of men. It's not the spirit of this world that depends on the power of God. We begin by being humble. Paul suggests, I think, a laughable kind of wisdom that the world may not understand, but maybe we can recognize it.

I want to mention to you a couple of people, and I know I've told some of you about them before, but it bears repeating. I had a man who was a member of the first church that I served, and he was always stunningly wise in a meeting or anywhere. You know what he said? He said the most amazing things. I would always take notes. He was so wise. I went to him to his home

to say, "You're one of the wisest people I've ever met in my life. What's your secret?" Of course, he immediately resisted the idea that he was so wise. Then he did say this. He said, "If I have any secret at all, I think it's this..." He'd never been to college. I thought he was reading Aristotle at night – you know. He said "I work very hard all day long." He was a brick mason and worked hard with his hands. He said, "Then I come home and Peggy's got dinner ready and we eat. I talk to her for awhile and then I go down to my basement." Down in his basement there was a wood stove. He said, "I pull up an old empty peach crate, turn it upside down, and I'd sit on that crate and just think for a couple of hours. Then I'd go to bed." Try to contemplate this. Do we ever let ourselves do something like just go down to the basement and think? Of course we don't. That's why we're so smart – right? We do things like - we rush off to another event and we cram another something in or we turn on the TV – a lot of wisdom there, isn't there? He just sits in the basement and he thinks for a couple of hours every night.

I would say the wisest member of the Howell family, I wish I could say the wisest member of the Howell family is James Not Smart, but that would be incorrect. The wisest member of the Howell family is my cousin, Sharon, who was born with Down's syndrome. People pity her, but I do not. Sharon is content, happy, laughs easily. She doesn't know you but if you went to see her, she'd put her arms around you, hug you and say, "I love you and I love Jesus." It seems wise to me.

In Haiti, you watch the Haitians – they work at bare-knuckle work all day long just to survive, and when they're through with their work, they go to their homes – they don't go into their homes as there's no light in there – they sit out in front of their homes and they just open a Bible and they read it – Haitians reading their Bible. You and I, we're too busy for that. We've got a lot of important stuff to do and we're rushing around. Wisdom, it's the power of God, it's not the wisdom of men.

Paul says this, and I love it, and this is the last thing and I'll be done. I apologize for talking too long. Paul says, "We impart a secret. It is the hidden wisdom of God decreed before the ages for our glorification. We impart a secret." I like to think about secrets. At lunch the other day with our administrative assistants, I brought up something and they rose to the bait. I told them about a sociologist I know whose research subject is Family Secrets. And they started telling them. It was fun, all kinds of juicy, sordid stuff. It was like hidden siblings that nobody knew about. It was great. We love telling these things. What is that about? Why is it that we know some delicious secrets – maybe they're not delicious secrets, maybe they're shameful things that you don't quite tell. It's a secret. Paul says that the Gospel is a secret. Are all secrets some hidden darkness or can a secret be something that is wonderful? One of my first secrets – I was on the playground as a little boy and I saw a girl named Linda – why do I remember that after all these years? Linda. I loved Linda, but it was a secret. But I told my little friend David "I love Linda" and he blabbed it all over the playground – humiliating. But it's not always humiliating. I had a secret many years later – I loved Lisa, and it was a secret, but one day I told her. I said – I took my life in my hands – "I love you." After that, she and I had another secret a couple of years after that. She had gone to the doctor to see if she was pregnant. I was at a meeting down in Matthews and we had a little break. I got on the phone and called her – and she is pregnant – oh my goodness, gracious. I go back into the meeting and it's one of these kind of drroll meetings – people are bored and annoyed – and I come in and...I've got tears in my eyes

and they're like, "What's with you?" And I'm like, "I can't tell. It's a secret." But it was a good secret because it meant that life was on the way. So many secrets are like that. It's what the Kingdom of God's secret is like. It's the creator of the universe whispering, "I do love you." And this new life on the way, and it hasn't come yet but when it comes it's going to change everything and it's going to be so wonderful. It's a secret. God.

Why did Jesus come down to unveil this secret? I love the way Paul puts it. He says it was for our glorification. Isn't that amazing? We tend to think we're supposed to glorify God. That's why we come here and we sing and we do all this – we're glorifying God, and God should be glorified, but God always does us one better, which is, "I sent Jesus to do what? To glorify you. Wow. We tend to think "He sent him down here so we'd feel a little better this afternoon or so we'd be a little more successful in the world or something." It's too trivial. What he came down to do is to glorify us so that we might be in heaven forever with God and with Jesus. We'll be like Jesus forever. We will be glorified. How good of God. How merciful of God. How awesome of God to glorify us.

Paul closes with these words: *What no eye has seen nor ear heard nor the heart of man can see God has prepared for those who love Him.* It's beyond all our imagining, but the secret is out. It's a beautiful secret. It's in the cross. God's love changes everything.

Thanks be to God.