

“How Big is Your God?”
1 Corinthians 9:16-23

About 350 years ago a shipload of travelers landed on the northeast coast of America. The first year they established a town site. The next year they elected a town government. The third year the town government planned to build a road five miles westward into the wilderness. In the fourth year the people tried to impeach their town government because they thought it was a waste of public funds to build a road five miles westward into a wilderness. Who needed to go there anyway? They sailed across the ocean only to limit their vision to a small portion of the country.

As people we often have this resistance to drastic change or creative thinking. We want to see things evolve and work into their best potential, ourselves included, yet it is hard to let go of our known and trusted ways that give us a sense of security. A little change is OK but too much and then all of our resistances are up. This was certainly the case for Paul expecting the gospel of Jesus Christ to move the people of the church in Corinth to change and adapt to the new and creative ways of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When Paul founded the church in Corinth, the people were excited about the new message of God’s love, but over and over again, Paul had to write them long letters to deal with their disagreements, self-centered interests and conflicts.

The congregation was mainly of Gentile origin and reflected the diversity of the city’s population. Corinth was a major port. It was an industrial and ship-building center. Its citizens came from far and wide. In this letter, Paul answers two letters he had received concerning lack of harmony and internal strife in the Corinthian church, a church he had founded. The class divisions that existed in the community were also reflected in the church community. In his book, *Paul and Empire* Richard Horsley sees that Paul’s missionary work, must be conceived not simply in terms of a traveling evangelist offering or spreading a religious message or experience, but in terms of an ambassador for a political movement or a new empire that has the story, the symbols, the practice and truth of a new king (Jesus). This was a deeply counter-imperial and subversive movement against the Roman Empire. In fact, when Paul was imprisoned, he felt that this was part of his doing his job properly. That is why Paul saw the urgency of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. He did not just see it as a matter of personal salvation. He saw it as a necessity for our whole world to be saved and redeemed from greed, power-mongering, and oppression. The work of Christ in bringing political, spiritual and social liberation is to be continued by his followers. It is urgent work because the Empire and its oppressive systems were still in power.

Yet, this broad vision for the amazing story of salvation was met with a limited view by the Corinthians. Jesus came so that the whole world would be redeemed by God’s love, and Paul and others were captivated by this vision. However, the Corinthians’ cultural conflicts and perceptions got in the way. They even questioned supporting Paul financially. They also argued about what kind of food to eat. In these few verses we read from the first letter to the Corinthians we see that Paul is trying to remind the people of that church about the compelling message of the gospel. The word gospel is repeated several times in this passage for emphasis. It is as if Paul was saying to them, “Hey friends, remember what is important, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that we are about here and not all these things that you are fighting about.” Paul also goes on to remind them that the gospel was for all people and not just for some. God’s love is universal. For this part Paul deals with the issue of how the gospel can be related to different people of different cultural and religious backgrounds. There is a different quality to community which the gospel brings. The church community is not shaped like the rest of society is shaped. The gospel was not something to be enjoyed but something to be shared

and lived. Because of his diverse cultural background, Paul was able to see that the gospel was inclusive of different backgrounds. Because of his love for Christ, Paul was able to reach beyond the limits of culture, class and religion. Although as a Jew and a Roman citizen, Paul had the power to be exclusive, he did not exercise that power. The gospel of Christ came first.

So, today these challenges that Paul was presenting to the church in Corinth are presented to us. Is the message of the gospel compelling enough to be shared with all? Do we see the need for Christ's saving work in our current empires and systems of oppression today? Do we see the urgent need for our own country to be redeemed by God's love during this time of massive greed and corruption? Are we able to reach out to people of different faith and cultural backgrounds for the sake of Christ? Are we able to embrace cultural differences and make them our own for the sake of the gospel? Are we obedient enough to the gospel of Jesus Christ to let go of our personal preferences for the sake of the gospel? How would we respond if the letter was addressed to us?

In his book, *The Christian Life A Geography of God*, Michael Lindvall writes, "This...is a precise image of how so many people misunderstand the spiritual life. Spirituality is one band of interest in life. God is a priority among any number of life's priorities. At first, it appears to be a sensibly proportioned life, a well-balanced stew you might say: a cup of career, a cup of play, a cup of family or friends, and finally, a cup of God...If there is one bottom-line truth that Jesus is insistent about, it is that if you should choose to follow him, you have to follow him with all of you, not just a part of you."

Sometimes we act as if our faith is just another nice addition to our lives. What undergirds this kind of attitude is that the God we are in relationship with is really a small matter. Our attitudes and beliefs about people of other faiths sometimes also show our lack of belief that God is really big enough for us and for them. As human beings we struggle with all of this because somewhere along the way, we have stopped falling in love with the world and with life. We have lost our big dreams for a world filled with love and replaced them with a narrow self-interest that only makes us even more miserable and controlling.

A couple of weeks ago, I was blessed to watch what I would describe to be an antidote to that kind of attitude in life. This is a DVD called "*Everyday Creativity with Dewitt Jones*." Dewitt Jones is a photographer for the national geographic. In this DVD he shares about the importance and value of creativity in every moment of our lives in every aspect of our being. When we talk about creativity, often times we think of artists, poets, and musicians. But the invitation is for all of us to be creative in all that we do because if we are actually in love with life, we can't help but be creative. There are several principles that Jones presents for this kind of creativity:

1. Creativity is the ability to look at the ordinary and see the extraordinary
2. Every act can be a creative one
3. Creativity is a matter of perspective
4. There's always more than one right answer
5. Reframe problems into opportunities
6. Don't be afraid to make mistakes
7. Break the pattern
8. Train your technique
9. You've got to really care

I believe that the Apostle Paul knew these principles in his ministry not because he watched Dewitt Jones on creativity but because he was filled with the love of God. Christ's message of hope for the world captured his imagination in such a way that he knew he had to share it. The love of Christ was welling up in his heart in such a way that he could not help but share it. This is the invitation for each of us today. As we face the difficult realities of our world such as war, poverty, greed, economic crisis, we are invited to look at these ordinary problems to see through the eyes of faith the extraordinary potential of life. Wherever you may be stuck in your life, I invite you today to look through the creative eyes of faith to see the potential for a new energy to be in that area. Invite the creative power of the Spirit to help you create a new possibility out of those areas of seemingly dead ends.

Our world is in desperate need for this kind of love and creativity. When St. Petersburg, one of the most splendid and harmonious cities in Europe, was being laid out early in the eighteenth century, many large boulders brought by a glacier from Finland had to be removed. One particularly large rock was in the path of one of the principal avenues that had been planned, and bids were solicited for its removal. The bids submitted were very high. This was understandable, because at that time modern equipment did not exist and there were no high-powered explosives. As officials pondered what to do, a peasant presented himself and offered to get rid of the boulder for a much lower price than those submitted by other bidders. Since they had nothing to lose, officials gave the job to the peasant. The next morning he showed up with a crowd of other peasants carrying shovels. They began digging a huge hole next to the rock. The rock was propped up with timbers to prevent it from rolling into the hole. When the hole was deep enough, the timber props were removed and the rock dropped into the hole below the street level. It was then covered with dirt, and the excess dirt was carted away. It's an early example of what creative thinking can do to solve a problem. The unsuccessful bidders only thought about moving the rock from one place to another on the city's surface. The peasant looked at the problem from another angle. He considered another dimension -- up and down. He couldn't lift it up, so he put it underground.

May the gospel of Jesus of Christ be so compelling in our lives that through the eyes of faith we are able to see the creative power of our Creator in all that we do and all that we are. Amen.

Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life A Geography of God*.

Resources used in the sermon

Horsley, Richard, ed., *Paul and Empire*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997

Jones, Dewitt, *Everyday Creativity*, DVD.

Lindvall, Michael, *The Christian Life A Geography of God*, Geneva Press, 2001.