

Sermon #978: 1 Corinthians 2:9-16
8-26-12 (Trinity 12), Bethany-Princeton MN

ENLIGHTENED!

Prayer: Almighty God, unto You all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from You no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You, and worthily magnify Your holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Gregorian Sacramentary, 6th c.*)

The Text, 1 Corinthians 2:9-16. ⁹ But as it is written: *“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”* ¹⁰ But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. ¹³ These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. ¹⁴ But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. ¹⁶ For *“who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?”* But we have the mind of Christ. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

The verse we should know by heart in this reading is verse 14: **“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”**

We teach this verse in catechism instruction. It isn’t a verse that will show up on inspirational cards. It isn’t one that rolls off the tongue or is easy to remember. It sounds pretty negative: instead of extolling all you can be, it speaks of what you *can’t* do. This verse is totally out of step with the times in which we live. But there’s hardly a verse that is more *needed* because of the times in which we live.

St. Paul is writing to the Christians of Corinth. Their city was considered important and up-to-date. The people of this church were gifted, accomplished. We see this in Paul's two epistles to them where he dwells on their "gifts" that they were so proud of, keeps returning to the subject of "the wisdom of this age" that impressed them, and criticizes their boasting in everything but Christ, for example (4:8): "*You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us,*" without the Gospel, which they act as if they don't need.

In other words, it's not so different from the world and time in which we live. In our time too there is little patience with God and His Word. What people are proud of, what impresses them, what they boast of to others, is everything but the Gospel. There's nothing our world thinks it can't do or know. We have an information superhighway, the internet. If you want to know anything, it's at your fingertips. Ours is the "I know" generation, easily bored and unimpressed.

So we need this verse that says "**the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them.**" The word "*natural*" here in "the natural man" is the same word used in the creation of Adam, when it says that "*man became a living being*" (Ge 2:7). There is something glorious in this: man is the best part of God's creation, the ability of the human mind is staggering, and we glory in the achievement of humanity, when you look at advances made in the fields of medicine, science, math, astronomy, technology, etc. When you think how little God told us of the created world and how it works, and how much man has discovered, it's breathtaking.

The word used to describe this is *enlightenment*, that modern man is "enlightened" when it comes to knowing things about which we were "in the dark," so to speak, for many years. We realize future generations likely will look back upon us as a people who didn't know very much; there will be *much* more progress in these areas. But, this verse says, there is one area in which there is and

will be no progress at all, “**natural man**” always will remain “*in the dark*”: in “*spiritual things*,” that is, “**the things of the Spirit of God**,” the things that belong to, originate from, and come from, God the Holy Spirit. What things? The things pertaining to salvation and eternal life, or in the words of the catechism, that “*I can believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, and come to Him.*”

We tend to think this should not be very hard. Come up with a few snappy evangelism techniques, find an argument for the truth that will silence the skeptics, present the love of Christ in the most tender, inviting way, and it will be irresistible. To be sure, failing to think about how to evangelize the lost, failing to use the gift of logic to seriously address the doubts that some people have, and failing to present the love of Christ in a winsome way can be hindrances for the Gospel. But in themselves they will never be enough, because of what this verse says. Nobody is converted to Christ because of how persuasive our preaching and teaching is. But this discussion isn’t limited to converting a crass unbeliever.

Think of the place God’s Word has in your own life and how much or little it influences your own behavior. You can agree with Jesus’ words, “*Love your enemies*,” until you have to love and forgive someone who disrespected you or your child. You can agree that all your blessings come from God until He takes from you or asks you to give generously in your offerings to Him. You can agree with the 4th commandment about honoring parents and superiors until God’s teaching would require you to shut your mouth from complaining about your boss or your teacher. You can agree with the 5th commandment about helping and befriending your neighbor until this requires you to show kindness to someone on whom it seems to be wasted.

See how resisting His Word is not just something unbelievers or unconverted people do? Isn’t it more proof, as this important Bible verse says, that it is utterly impossible for natural man to “**receive**” the things that God tells us in His

Word, “**nor can he know them**”? It isn’t only an inability that has to do with intellect. This word “receive” means to give a warm welcome to His Word. This is what – as fallen creatures – we don’t do. When it’s uncomfortable or inconvenient, your sinful nature leads you to slam the door shut and refuse to listen. This is how we too are guilty of saying that the things the Holy Spirit brings “**are foolishness.**” You say it whenever you refuse to live in accordance with His Word.

All of this will help us be more realistic. Don’t be surprised if an unbeliever won’t be persuaded. Or if a fellow Christian, or a family member who’s been trained in God’s Word, at some point rejects it or resists being led back. Don’t be shocked at how poorly you follow or respond to His Word. This verse reveals *why*: it is “**the natural man not receiving the things of the Spirit of God.**”

But the answer to the problem is in that name ringing in our ears: “**the Spirit of God,**” who in this passage is not some impersonal “spirit” but is *named* as a real Person, a personal God, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity: “**the Spirit who is from God.**” He is a Person. He is love. He loves you. He is never content to rest and let things be when you’re resisting. It is true, as St. Stephen said to his persecutors, that “*you always resist the Holy Spirit,*” that’s the essence of “**natural man,**” but it does not end there. It is the essence of the Holy Spirit to continue loving even those who are resisting Him, never to turn His back on them or forsake them, but to keep coming, bringing Christ in the means of grace, to keep working at breaking down the walls of resistance. It is not by my reason and strength, or yours, that this happens, but only by the divine power of His Word – a power He uses only for your good, because He unselfishly loves you, and this is true of *everyone* whose sinful will He overcomes with His will that *all* be saved.

This work of His also called *enlightenment*. Yes, you are enlightened! But it is so different from the way our world uses that word. This passage says that “**the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.**” But the way He

uses knowledge is different from us. Many people – philosophers through the centuries among them -- are content to keep knowledge for themselves, to find *self*-fulfillment. But this says the Holy Spirit is not content only **“to search the deep things of God,”** but to make them known to you in His Word. He is love.

“He has enlightened me with His gifts ... He enlightens the whole Christian Church on earth.” It is completely unselfish. He shares the very best things that belong to Him. He wants you to have them and share in them. They are gifts, the gifts of His grace, God’s forgiving love, the gift that is Christ Himself appearing to you in His Word, in Baptism, in the Lord’s Supper. For these people who were so proud of their own “gifts,” and what they supposedly brought to the table, through St. Paul the Lord emphasizes His gifts which the Holy Spirit brings: **“that you might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.”** He brings these gifts – the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation -- only in His Word and Sacraments. He brings them to you. *These* are **“the things which God has prepared for those who love Him,”** they are not confined to heaven but He pointedly says, **“God has revealed them to us through His Spirit,”** in His Word.

This is His answer to all the resisting of His Word done by the natural man, our sinful nature. He breaks down the resistance by the power of His Word. This use of His power is only loving. It’s the way He loves you.

It also teaches us how we should be toward those who are resisting what is right, or who reject His Word or who respond to our attempts to reach out to them only with anger and resentment or pushing us away. As the Holy Spirit deals with us, as an extension of Christ who sends Him, we learn how to deal with others: not to turn our backs on them or give up on them, but continue to love them even when they are resisting, and simply to keep coming to them with God’s Word, speaking the truth but only in love, and let the Holy Spirit do His work. It can’t be achieved with our most careful methods or skillful persuasion.

It is a miracle of the Holy Spirit that anyone comes to Jesus Christ and believes in Him. We leave it to Him to work this miracle, through the Gospel to bring about an "amen" to God's Word where the natural man would only say "no." Amen!