

“Sunshine or Cloud?”
I Corinthians 3:1-4/Matthew 4:17-25
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I. Introduction

Sunshine or cloud.....shorts or coats.....80 degrees or sleet and snow....such were the deep, existential questions I pondered as Jeanne and I returned from Florida this week. After a few days at a conference in Orlando, we were able to enjoy the beaches, sand, sun, surf, seafood, museums and art of Florida. We even pondered aloud a strange thing for Western Pennsylvanians in winter; do we need sunglasses? A few days in sun and shorts felt like taking a deep breath.

After a week of sun in Florida, as we approached the Pittsburgh Airport we, of course, descended through the clouds. We were back to gray. The weather welcomed us home with 35 degrees, and a combination of sleet and rain. Old, dirty snow was piled here and there. And I thought of a colleague in ministry from years ago. Steve had done all of his 23 years of ministry in eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, dealing with demographic and economic downturns, and the never ending skies of gray. He said he would like to try ministry in an area where the “turns” were up, and the skies sunny. About a year later, Steve and his wife moved to Florida. I could understand that.

As we descended into the western Pennsylvania winter I thought of Steve, “up turns,” and the Florida sun. I remembered a lunch we had together a few years ago when he was back visiting. He shared about his aging congregation, declining numbers, and the struggling economy in his part of Florida. I said, “It sounds like western Pennsylvania to me.” Steve laughed, and responded, “It is.....except the sun still shines.” We then talked about the deeper things of ministry; worship, mission, and living together as the people of God. Sunshine or cloud.....shorts or coats....80 degrees or sleet and snow....Florida or western Pennsylvania....what is it that really matters in the life of a church.....in the life together of Christians? Is it sunshine or cloud? What really matters?

II. Text

Read I Corinthians 3:1-4

III. Brief Exegesis

Sunshine or cloud....what really matters in a Christian community? The Corinthians thought they knew; knowledge.....knowledge is what really matters.

Sometimes I've thought the Corinthians were the proto-Presbyterians. We belong to a tradition that has emphasized "knowing the faith." We belong to a tradition that still requires pastors to know Greek and Hebrew, read the theology of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, study church history, discuss ethics, and practice preaching. I like that. I may have been a good Corinthian. Knowledge matters.

Knowledge mattered to the Corinthians. They equated knowledge with spiritual maturity; the more you know about God, the more spiritual you are. And they seem to have been complaining to Paul that he didn't give them enough big ideas. They were mature people.....spiritual people.....and they wanted the "solid food" of deeper thinking.

But Paul knows differently. In the new economy of God's kingdom he knows the Corinthians are not as mature as they would like to believe. The real test of maturity is not knowledge. The real test of spiritual growth is not knowing the answers. The real test of spiritual maturity is.....the quality of Christian life together.

Paul speaks honestly to the Corinthians; their quarreling and divisions show an immaturity. They are not the spiritually mature people of God's coming age. Rather they are people still living in the ways of the old age. And they are not able to handle the "solid food" of deeper truth. Rather they are limited to the "milk" of basic truths. The "window into the spiritual heart" is not knowledge. The real window into the spiritual heart is how well Christians live together. Maturity in God's kingdom is not measured in what you know. Maturity in God's kingdom is measured in how you live. Answers are easy. Living together in love is hard. Sunshine or cloud....that's what matters most. That is "solid food."

Our confirmation class confessed their Christian faith today. Over the process of confirmation they have learned some things about Christian faith. But more importantly, they have been on a journey. With a mentor they have visited a shut-in, shared in a mission, read and discussed the gospel of Luke, talked about worship, and shared their journeys of faith with the Session. They have learned that Christian faith is not most about answers. Rather, they discovered Christian faith is most about a way of life lived with others following Jesus. That, too, is "solid food."

"Repent. The kingdom of God has come near." (Mt. 4:17) With that message Jesus begins his ministry. He calls men to follow him, to be close to him.....to learn and experience this "kingdom of God." Though not numbered among the 12, women follow too. They hear preaching and teaching. They see miracles and healing. In Jesus the kingdom of God has come near. People come. The crowd grows. The disciples learn.

But even more they live.....they live a certain way of life together with Jesus. They have left their previous ways of life. Now they are practicing a different way of life together.

This life together is an illustration of Jesus' teaching, preaching, healing and works of power. The kingdom of God comes near in Jesus. The kingdom of God also comes near in their life together with Jesus. It is an illustration.....it is a demonstration..it is an incarnation....of salvation with Jesus. Salvation changes how Christians live together. Yes there is knowledge and answers. But even more there is a community practicing the art of learning to live in love. It is what Paul might call spiritual, mature... .."solid food."

And behind it all is the cross. The cross is the story of Jesus and the power of God. The cross is the salvation of God, which heals the brokenness and confusion in our lives. The cross is the way of Jesus as a way of life lived in community. It is nothing less. And there is nothing more.....sunshine or cloud.

IV. Reflections

This text brings a few things to mind. They are things for us to think about.....or better, things for us to live.

First, knowledge does matter. Paul is not saying that understanding has no place in Christian faith. Jesus did preach and teach. Paul's letter to the Corinthians is filled with teaching. I still try to stay up on Greek, Hebrew, and reading theology and history. Over the past few years I've tried to add some art, poetry, classical music and architecture to my life. **I believe what fills our heads shapes our hearts (repeat).** I believe 11th C theologian Anselm is right, "faith does seek understanding." We are people who seek to understand life, creation and faith. Our greater challenge is not that faith is opposed to knowledge (it is not). Rather our challenge is having the knowledge to respond to the deeper questions of faith. If I want to answer the more complicated equations of algebra and geometry I need more than a 5th grade understanding of math. So it also is with our faith. If I want to wrestle with the deeper things of our faith, such as resurrection, Jesus as God and man, the trinity, the authority of scripture, and the coming new creation I need more than a 5th grade Sunday School understanding of theology. Presbyterians bring a tradition of deep theology to the Christian faith. I'm glad to be part of that tradition. Knowledge does matter.

But, second, life together matters more. That's Paul's point with the Corinthians. Mature Christians.....spiritual people of the new age....live together in all that the cross means. Christian faith is not a "head trip" all about me. Rather it is a heart journey for us all.....together. And that is why Jesus called disciples. In him and in the

community that followed him every day, the kingdom of God did come near. This doesn't mean that everyone says the same things, or understands the same way, or even believes exactly the same truths. There are disagreements and differences. And we continue say and do things we shouldn't, and fail to do and say things we should. That's why there is confession, forgiveness and love. But a Christian community, a church, it is also strangely more. It's like an orchestra of different musicians playing a Beethoven symphony together, or a team of basketball players with different gifts playing well together so to win the game, or the different colors of glass in a Tiffany stained-glass windowlife together matters more. And while Presbyterians belong to a tradition that encourages knowledge, our conflicted and schismatic history shows we struggle more in living life together.

And finally, Christian life together shares the gospel. When we live the Christian life together with Jesus the kingdom of God still comes near. Some on the FPC staff have been reading together Rob Bell's book, Love Wins with me. And in it is a story that keeps coming to my mind. This is the story Rob Bell tells:

"On the Sundays when I give the sermon at our church, I usually sit on the edge of the stage and talk to the people after the service. And every week the same woman walks up to me and hands me a piece of paper. We've been going through this ritual for several years now. She smiles, and we chat for a moment or two, and then she walks away. The piece of paper she hands me is always the same size, about four by five inches, folded, with writing inside in the upper left corner. I unfold it each week while she watches, and then I read what she's written on it.

A number with a few comments next to the number.

Sometimes the number is big, like 174. Sometimes it's smaller. I remember once when it was 2.

The number is how many days it's been since she last cut herself. She's struggled with a self-injury addiction for years, but lately a group of people have been helping her find peace and healing. But she still struggles, some weeks more than others.

She recently told me that every man she's ever been with hit her.

So when she hears about love, it's not a concept she's familiar with. Which makes sense.

Beaten, hit, abused, neglected.....and then she's told that God loves her unconditionally without reservation....without her having to do anything to earn it? That's a stretch. Hard to believe, given what she's seen of the world." (Rob Bell, Love Wins, pp. 163-4)

Rob Bell preaches the gospel. He gives answers. He shares knowledge about God. But more importantly he, and members of his church live a certain way

together....living the love of God..and in that this woman finds some peace and healing. What he preaches matters. How they live together matters more. It is a miracle. The kingdom of God comes near.

For me, the power of that story is in its particularity, and in its honest truth. And that story can be retold in a 1000 different versions.....some here, and many more in our community. Abuse as a child, or now.....a struggle with alcoholism....guilt and a bad choice.....a broken marriage.....shame over a mental illness.....depression.....fear about failing health.....anger over a loss. Is God's love for me? Is there any healing? Is there any hope? Can I be honest here? It matters what we say. But it matters more how we live together.....as mature, spiritual people of the new age....where the kingdom of God still comes near....among us, through us, in us.

Sunshine or cloud.....sandals or boots.....sand or piles of dirty snow.....it's good to be home with you.....where we can live together and do what matters most.