

Nothing Means Everything

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16)

The event today is about someone important and something significant. Super Bowl LI will be played at Reliant Stadium in Houston, Texas. We've already heard plenty about New England and Atlanta. There have been plenty of words. There has been an abundance of "lofty speech" and "wisdom" from players and coaches, from fans and commentators, in print and on TV and on countless sports talk shows. But, in a week of media blitz, with thousands of reporters grabbing and grasping for any kind of story. It's no surprise that not even 6 in 10 Americans say that the actual game is their favorite thing about the Super Bowl. A survey done this week reported that the commercials are Americans' second favorite thing about the whole Super Bowl experience. Most of the hype is saying a lot about nothing. The game will settle it all. Someone will do something spectacular. Or something will happen to someone that's unexpected, either awesome or awful.

All that is the complete opposite of how Paul addresses the Church at Corinth in the second chapter of his first letter. Paul says he *didn't* come to them with lofty speech and wisdom. He *didn't*, in fact, have a lot to say—at least not about a lot of different things. Certainly, he *didn't* say a lot about nothing.

So here's what *is* before us in today's text: Paul's words are filled with a triple negative—not, no one, nothing—that becomes wonderfully positive. In fact, from this Word of God we will discover and rejoice that "Nothing" Means Everything.

What do we *want* to see and hear? What do we *need* to see and hear? What do the redeemed people of God need to hear? What does the fallen world need to hear? This is what Paul gets at when he says to the Corinthians in our text: "I decided to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

The Gospel is *not* revealed by the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. For Paul did *not* come proclaiming with lofty speech or wisdom. "When I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom" (v 1).

In fact, "eye has *not* seen and ear has *not* heard all that God has prepared for those who love Him" (v 9, NASB). Yet Epiphany light has revealed the promised Savior to a blinded world still trapped in the darkness since our fall into sin.

We are always impressed with human wisdom – people

with high IQs and people who can recite hundreds of decimal places of Pi. We don't believe the Gospek with human wisdom.

It is "*not* a wisdom of this age" through which the Gospel is learned (v 6), but it is only when God works his revelation, for "we have received *not* the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God" (v 12).

Paul's speech and message "were *not* in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power", "the power of God."

Because the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church" (Small Catechism), "*no one* comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God".

"*None* of the rulers of this age understood" God's "secret and hidden wisdom" (vv 8, 7), and, in ignorance, they crucified the Lord of glory. They did not—they could not—understand that God's wisdom was greater, and that it had been in place "before the ages" (v 7). They did not understand—and, without the Spirit's work, neither do we—what God prepared, and what the Spirit made known.

No one can grasp God's eternal plan, from first promise to final fulfillment and future glory. *No one* can grasp how God thinks and, so, how he acts—that he acts not in judgment and condemnation, but in mercy and grace, in kindness and love. *No one* can discover for herself the Good News of salvation. We may try to figure God out, but we fail.

Our struggles can and should turn us from our attempts at spiritual knowledge and insight to looking at the Word. But we continue to look up or look inside—rather than to look down at the written and revealed Scriptures.

In the 1840s, strong anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment arose among certain native-born Protestant Americans who saw foreigners and Catholics as a threat to their economic and political security. In 1849, the secret *Order of the Star Spangled Banner* was formed in New York City. Soon after, similar lodges formed in many other American cities. Members, when asked about their exclusionary, nativist organization, were supposed to say they knew nothing. They were known as the "Know-Nothing Party."

The movement grew, so that in the 1850s the group shed its secret, covert nature and took the name *American Party*. Their stands included

restrictions on immigration, the exclusion of foreign-born people from voting or holding public office, and a twenty-one-year residency requirement for US citizenship. When Congress assembled on December 3, 1855, forty-three representatives were openly members of the *Know-Nothing Party*. A later proposal in California in the 1880s called for the exclusion of Chinese and other Asians from industrial employment.

Paul's words to the Corinthians are even stronger than the claims of this long-forgotten American political movement. He states what was always true for him—and what is always true for the Church and her pastors and her people: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

This text reveals the heart of Paul's missionary efforts. More than that, it reveals the living heart of the Church, of the Church's life and identity, and of the Church's mission and proclamation: “For I decided to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (v 2). This is the truth. This is the message. This is the task. This wasn't just for Paul to get right as he wrote to the Corinthian Christians. This is for the Church of all times and all places.

This is not simply saying “in Christ alone”. This is not simply repeating the mottos throughout this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation. And this is not just TALKING a lot about Jesus, which, we pray, most preachers and churches do without fail.

Well, yes, we must talk about Jesus Sunday after Sunday, but Paul doesn't tell us to do this just any old way. Instead he says, “I decided to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ *and him crucified*.” For the cross must be at the center of our proclamation, because this is how Jesus Christ is made known. And nothing else matters . . .

. . . or else our sin still matters. And guilt still matters. And shame still matters. And separation from the holy God still matters. And eternal damnation still matters. But because of Jesus' death, as both our substitute and our sacrifice, now forgiveness matters. Redemption matters. Freedom matters. Restoration matters.

The commercials before and during and after today's Super Bowl want us to notice and know a lot of things. Advertisers are betting millions on it! But the contrast today is this: the cross alone—just the one message of Christ crucified—is the never-ending truth that the Church proclaims, that the Christian affirms, and that the Holy

Spirit uses to redeem and rescue and restore sinners. With Paul *I* say, with Paul *we* say: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Amen?

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