

Beginnings

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Corinthians 2: 1-5

Delivered on February 2, 2020

I remember one time I was teaching a Sunday school class when I realized I had no idea how to teach Sunday school. You see, in my class was a woman named Erma. Erma was about three times my age, she was a southern belle, and she was very proper. She was the kind of person who thought that if you were a woman and you wore slacks to church you might as well pledge your allegiance to Satan. You know the type. Well, I was trying to teach Erma's class, which happened to be a class on the gospels, and I said to them that most scholars believe the first gospel to be written was Mark. Mark, I said, was written thirty-five or forty years after Jesus walked the earth, and after that came Matthew and Luke, and then the last gospel to be written was John at about the end of the first century. So first came Mark, then Matthew Luke and finally John. I didn't see what could be controversial about that. "Well, I don't know about that young man, Erma said. "All I know is my bible starts with Matthew."

"Oh, I understand, the bible goes in order from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but you see, Miss Erma, I'm not talking about the order of the gospels as they appear in the bible, what I'm talking about is the order in which they were written. You see, Mark was the first gospel to be written."

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"Oh, yes, yes, Miss Erma, mine does too in fact. They all start with Matthew, but again what I'm talking about now is the order in which they were written down. You're right that

Matthew is the first one that you come to when you start reading the New Testament, but Mark was the first to be written down.”

“My bible starts with Matthew.”

Well, I gave up at that point. “Ok, your bible starts with Matthew.”

Well, today I want to tell you that no matter how your bible starts, you might be misled by the way things appear in your bible, or my bible, or any bible for that matter. Not only was Matthew not the first gospel to be written, actually the New Testament doesn’t begin with the gospels at all. Long before we had the gospels we had what we call the epistles or the letters that were mostly written by Paul. These were letters to churches like the one we read from today in the New Testament, letters that we call Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Philippians, Galatians and so forth. That’s what was in the New Testament long before there was a single gospel.

Now, I want to give you a moment to digest what I have just told you, because if you think about what I just said, you realize there is a problem. You see, if first the thing that was written in the New Testament were letters to churches, what that means is that there were Christian churches before there were gospels. So naturally, you might want to ask me what were you to do if you were in a church before the gospels were written. Imagine if we were all sitting here at Northminster and we didn’t have any gospels. Are you telling me that all they had was the Old Testament and the letters of Paul. Actually, no. That’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying is that it was much worse than that. You see, these letters weren’t part of the bible until many,

many years later. At the time, they were just letters. They were just like emails. So, all we would have had that was the Old Testament, and some stories they told about Jesus.

So let's say this is us. Let's say we, the members of Northminster are living at the dawn of Christianity, let's say we're living in 60 AD. We have the Old Testament. And we have the stories about Jesus. What kind of stories do we tell? Well, maybe we can look at this letter we have today to one such church, and it will tell us.

When we look at this early church in Corinth, we hear Paul say when I came among you brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom. For 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. Now, excuse me, but what does that mean? Does that mean that in this early church not only did they not have the entire New Testament, but all they had was Christ crucified? That is, all they had was the crucifixion? What about the story of Easter? What is Christianity without Easter? What about the story of Christmas? What is Christianity without Christmas?

Well, I do not think Paul means to say that in the early church they don't have Christmas and Easter, they don't have Palm Sunday and the Last Supper, they don't have Jesus feeding five thousand and walking on water and all these stories we love. But having a story about a dying, suffering Son of God is what makes us unique as Christians. And understand what I mean here. You see, I am not saying that the cross is the only thing, or even the most important thing. Certainly believing in God is quite important. Certainly believing in the Holy Spirit is quite important, certainly believing in the resurrection is quite important. And do you want to ask me

which is the most important, I don't know, it's all important. But the cross is what makes us unique because Paul says it makes no sense to the rest of the world. Paul called it a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. You're supposed to worship a God who is powerful, glorious and beloved. Everyone knows that. But on the cross, God takes the form of one who is weak, humiliated, rejected. Who could possibly understand that? Who could possibly worship someone like that?

I have heard about some churches out there where you will not find a single cross anywhere in the sanctuary or even the entire building. Some of these churches are making a serious effort to try and reach people who are turned off by your parent's church and who want to see a church without all the old symbols. And then there are other reasons for not using the cross that have nothing to do with reaching a new generation. When I was in Mexico, the Presbyterian Church there wouldn't use the cross because they said the cross is only for Catholics, it was a symbol of Catholicism to them. And the early church didn't use the cross as a symbol for their faith, they used a fish. Why a fish? Well, I would refer you back to the sermon I preached last week about fishing for people.

It doesn't matter to me whether a church uses the cross as a symbol. As a symbol, the cross can mean nothing for a congregation, or it can even be perverted into symbolizing something evil. I remember when I was living in North Carolina, a colleague of mine in ministry told me there was a man in his church who confessed that he was horrified by seeing a cross in the church, because every time he saw a cross, especially a wooden cross, it brought back a traumatic memory from his childhood. When he was a child, his neighbor who was white, was married to a black woman and when they moved in next door he awoke one night to look out

the window and see a large burning cross in his neighbor's yard. No, no, no, I'm not suggesting the cross could ever mean to us what it means to the Ku Klux Klan, but I'm a lot less worried about whether a church has a cross as a symbol than I am about whether it proclaims the message of the cross, I'm a lot less worried about whether a church has a cross as a symbol than I am whether it lives the message of the cross.

But why? Why is the cross so important anyway? Let me tell you a story. I remember when I was in graduate school, there was a guy named Keith who was just right out of college, and well while he was an undergraduate about a year earlier he had become friends with a girl named Kate. He fell in love with Kate but he never told her he loved her. He was too shy. Well, at the time he told me this, Kate was unfortunately not in a particularly convenient location where Keith could see her and confess his love. Kate you see wasn't just four or five states away, she was all the way in some remote African village where she was working for the Peace Corps. But Keith had made up his mind that he was going to go see her and tell her how he felt. And he described to me the way in which he had to go on a journey to go see Kate and good heavens, it was just ridiculous. The whole thing was ridiculous, or at least it seemed so to me. First, Keith had to get a series of shots and then he had to get a passport and a visa, and then he had to pay an arm and a leg to take an international flight to some African airport and then take a connecting flight with one of those commuter planes, I call them puddle jumpers. Then he had to take a train that only came to this station once a day, then a boat to cross a river because there was no bridge, and then he had to wait for a truck that only came by once a day, and all this time he wouldn't have cell phone service and he wouldn't be able to speak the language. And while I'm listening to all this, I'm saying, you know, Keith, this is ridiculous. This

girl is only going to be in the Peace Corps for a year, why don't you just wait till she gets out and call her up then. And if you can't wait for that, you know you're on a campus with about 10,000 young women who are all roughly your age, you can date one of them. But Keith didn't listen to me. He did all this to go see Kate, and tell her how he felt about her. But he didn't need to, because as soon as he got there and saw her, before he could get any words out, she said "Why would you come all this way just for me? Why would you go through all this just for me?" What if Keith hadn't gone to see her? What if he had taken my advice?

I remember when I was a senior in high school, I heard Tony Campolo say in a sermon that the Lord Jesus would have gone to the cross all over again just for me, just for me. If I was the only other person in the world he would have gone to the cross just for me. What if we just left that story out? What if we had everything else in the bible but we didn't have that. If you have ever asked yourself "Why would he go through all that just for me?" then you already know the answer to that question. That's why the cross matters. That's why we wouldn't be the church without the cross. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.