

Often, the challenge in preparing a sermon, is that by the time Sunday rolls around the message is in a more complete form. However, the ideal would be to have another two weeks to tweak and fine-tune it to perfection. This morning as I heard again the reading from 1 Corinthians I was struck with how often the Spirit is mentioned in this passage. I noticed how often the Spirit is mentioned in this passage. The Spirit was referenced in these ways: revealed through the Spirit, the Spirit searches the depths of God, we receive the Spirit from God, we are taught by the Spirit, and the Spirit interprets spiritual things to our spirits.

In the second reading this morning we find Paul looking all around Corinth, and he is aware of the various philosophies that are in vogue. He looks at what is perceived as wisdom among the Greeks there. And he says: you know what; there are a lot of high-falutin' words floating around this place. But I have decided that I am not going to speak to you on this ethereal – other-worldly level. Let me quote what Paul said: "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom." But instead Paul said that he had decided to only speak to them about Jesus Christ – the crucified one. That's it. No more. No greater wisdom. No deeper mystery. By the way, the word "mystery" that Paul used here is better translated "testimony," or "witness." What Paul is really saying here is better translated in the New Living Translation of the Bible. There it is stated: "I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God's secret plan.

However after informing them that he was going to make things real simple, he then shifts and throws out a curve ball and says this: "Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age . . . But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory." So apparently, Paul is addressing two groups of Christians here; those who are younger in the faith, among whom he keeps it a simple

message about Jesus. But, among the more mature believers, Paul speaks “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden.” The word “secret” by the way, is the Greek word “**μυστήριον**” where we get the English word mystery. So Paul is saying that there is a message that is beyond and deeper than the simple message of Jesus Christ. There is a deeper mystery of God’s plan that is subtly hinted at throughout the scriptures. But this deeper mystery is more than the young Christians can handle right now.

There is, first off, the simple teachings about Jesus that can be understood by those younger in the faith, and then, deeper mysteries of God that can only be grasped by more mature believers. Throughout scriptures we read about this. In Matthew’s gospel we read about an interaction Jesus had with his closest followers: “His disciples came and asked him, “Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?” He replied, “You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge.” This truth is also spoken of in the book of Hebrews. There is a sharp edge to what the author says there: “You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God’s word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food.” The author tells us that there is the expectation in scripture that when we begin the journey of the Christian faith, we establish a foundation of understanding the scriptures and the stories of Jesus life and ministry; the stories about the growing Christian church as it spread throughout the Roman Empire. However, as one continues to grow in the faith, they are expected to be ready for further and deeper teaching.

In 1931 the Bishop of Colombo wrote these words in the introduction to a book titled: “The Elements of the Spiritual Life.” In that introduction the bishop said: “Whether we are considering the work of

the Church at home or overseas, the slightest capacity of spiritual discernment must reveal to us the pressing need of a deeper spirituality.” He goes on to say: “[Our Lord] needs members [of His Church] . . . who share His Spirit and are animated by His life. He needs men and women who . . . are determined to draw nearer to His Heart The truth is, there are vast numbers of Christians who remain for a lifetime at the beginning of the way. Physically, mentally and in business or professional capacity they take pains to make steady advance; but spiritually they remain as little children, and, while efficient in worldly affairs, they are blind to the amazing possibilities of growth in spiritual life.” The Bishop says that ongoing development is a natural expectation in many areas of our lives. This natural growth and development is woven into the very fabric of the universe. As infants we learn to roll over before we can crawl. We crawl before we can walk. We walk before we can run. We develop our cognitive and social and emotional life over years. We land a job or two or three. Eventually we learn a trade or profession and continue to develop that trade or profession.

Development and evolution has also occurred in human exploration. We began a passionate exploration of the universe, often in an attempt to answer the great mysteries; to answer our deepest questions. Is there a meaning to life? Are we alone in the universe? Who are we? Why are we here? Thousands of years ago as mankind looked up, they could detect stars and planets and the Milky Way Galaxy. And then, with the invention of the telescope, we were able to spot the rings on Saturn, and moons around the planets in our solar system. We were able to explore beyond the capabilities of the naked eye. As our technology grew, our telescopes were able to reach further and further out into the galaxy. We were able to detect Quasars, Black Holes, and distant galaxies. And yet, there remains a further mystery beyond our ability to see.

We not only explored upwards to the great expanses; but we also looked smaller. We invented the microscope. Through its use we saw into the cells of all that exists. As this technology grew we could peer into molecules, and eventually even into atoms, and sub-atomic particles. But there remains even there, something smaller that our instruments cannot yet detect.

Even under the depths of our oceans this exploration progressed and marched on. Before the invention of the aqua lung in 1943, we could only see as far as one human breathe could take us. And then our explorations went deeper and deeper. With the invention of robotics we could explore to the bottoms of the Marianas Trench. It was even there that we were able to see amazing and bizarre creatures. Life that could somehow exist in the deepest black and extremes of pressure.

And yet I would say, the greatest adventure in human exploration and development does not lie out there, or down here, but within. Within the human brain. What is mind? Why do we dream? What is soul and spirit? This I believe holds the key to the greatest mysteries of life. The apostle Paul addresses these issues in today's passage. Paul said that there is ongoing growth and development in the spiritual realm. We are meant to establish a foundation in the basics of the faith. And then our hunger for answers and knowing should drive us to desire to explore more; to build upon that foundation with the deeper truths and mysteries of the faith.

When we consider the basic foundations of the faith, I realize that some of you may have grown up in a Christian tradition where weekly Sunday School was a norm. There you learned the books of the Bible. A Sunday School teacher taught you Old Testament and New Testament stories. You applied them to your lives as you grew. This is the basic foundation Paul was speaking about. But I also realize that some of you

grew up in a tradition where you were not exposed to basic Bible education. This foundation was never laid down.

For those of you who have this foundation already firmly laid down, there is deeper and further exploration and growth to be had. Our parish offers studies throughout the week, and small group Fellowship Flocks where you can continue to develop beyond those foundations. However, for those who have not yet established a foundation in the teachings of Jesus and the early church, that should be your next faith goal.

So, let me step back from this discussion to ask a crucial question. What is the ultimate goal of spiritual development as a Christian? What is the ultimate goal of the exploration in the spiritual realm? Where will our exploration take us as we strive to peer into the mysteries of God? What are we aiming for? Let me remind you again of Bishop Colombo's words spoken ninety years ago. He let us know that there is a "pressing need of a deeper spirituality," for "men and women who are determined to draw nearer to God's Heart."

The ultimate goal of our lives, as radical as it may sound, is to draw ever nearer, and nearer, and nearer, to God. The ultimate goal is union with God. Now, I would say that there is only one who walked this life who obtained the closest union with God possible as a human being. And that was Jesus. But just because that example is Jesus does not mean that union with God is beyond the realm of possibility for the rest of us. There are saints and mystics down through the centuries from the apostle John, the apostle Paul, the desert fathers, Dionysius of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Catherine of Siena, Thomas a' Kempis, and the list can go on, and on, and on, and on throughout the centuries; men and women who walked years of their

lives in intimate personal communion with God. I would say that this is some of the deeper mysteries Paul spoke about in his letter to the church in Corinth.

Let me encourage you to develop the desire and passion of the explorers of old. Take the time to understand where you are at spiritually, and figure out what your next step might be, and how you might get there. There are many books written over centuries that can guide you along the path. There are those in this parish who can assist you on this journey. You are never too old to start again or to continue on this journey. During our vestry retreat this past weekend we spent time yesterday discussing and sharing about this deeper journey into God. From my heart to yours, please do not take your current spiritual development as all that is possible for you. There is always more. Let me end with a story contemporary author and mystic James Finley shared in an audio file about this ongoing spiritual growth into the depths of intimacy with God.

“There is a stone falling in water. And imagine its falling, falling, falling, falling. And the water in which the stone is falling is bottomless. So its falling forever; falling forever; falling forever. And the water in which the stone is falling, is falling along an underwater cliff. And there are little protrusions along this cliff. And ever so often the stone lands on one of these protrusions. And pauses in its descent. And in the movements of the water it rolls off and continues on, and on, and on, and on. Now imagine you are that stone. And imagine we are all falling forever into God. And imagine you momentarily land on a little protrusion; where you get to a place where you say; “you know; I think I’ll stop here. I’ll set up shop. And get my bearings. Settle in. The dark night of the soul is the process of being dislodged by love from the perception that the point you’ve come to is deep enough for you. You see that? We come to a place of realization in love; you come to a place of self-knowledge; you come to a place of what life is about. And – we

pause there in a kind of a reflective, subjective experience of that depth of presence to life. And the self that lives there; imagine it has the final say in who we are. It's got all this marked out – got it figured out. Got its bearings. You go study theology. Become a God-ologist, write books. And then you fall in love, or your mother dies, or you have terminal cancer. You're utterly taken by the look in the eyes of the one who suffers. And you are dislodged from the ability to live on your own terms, and you continue on in the descent. So, then the dark night of the soul is like the divine strategy of artfully dislodging us from anything less than an infinite union with infinite love as being enough for us. As our destiny. As destiny."

May the hunger, and passion, and desire of the explorers down through the ages be our desire as we seek to sink deeper, and deeper into the infinite love and mystery of God. May God continually nudge us off any ledges in the cliff; those places where we may find ourselves settling in, and comfortable. And as we are nudged off the ledge, may we continue to descend deeper into God. Amen.