

Sermon for Sexagesima

Gustaf Wingren

1 Corinthians 1:20–25 · 1985

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Trollhättan Mission Church

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:20–25

This text belonged to the group of New Testament words that led Friedrich Nietzsche to call Christianity “the slave revolt of antiquity.” What Paul lists are low, common qualities: foolishness, weakness, a servant’s mind. These are found in the congregation. What was noble, on the other hand, what was grand in antiquity — wisdom, intelligence, power — is not found in the congregation. And that is what one boasts of. According to Paul, that is where the valuable thing lies.

Now there are two things to notice here — or three. The first is that what Paul writes in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians is the introduction to something that comes in chapters 3–13. It is the introduction to a reckoning with the members of the congregation in Corinth, a critical reckoning. There we find pride, contempt for the poor, and division reaching right into the meal of the breaking of bread. The rich grab for themselves, and the poor get nothing.

The second is that there is a presupposition behind everything Paul says. It is this: what is poor and small and hidden in the human body is the most important of all — the inner, invisible, small organs that the whole large and beautiful and fine body lives from. In reality, therefore, it is the opposite of what it appears to be. It is the weak and the small, even the unclean, the slimy and bloody things inside the body — that is the power, “God’s creative power,” which keeps life going. Whoever despises it despises his own life.

Yes, those are the two important points behind all that stands in the first chapter, behind our text. And then one can add the third, which does not stand in the text. The noble ancient empire that Nietzsche admired collapsed into nothing, as we know. And what rose up out of chaos and ruin was this low and poor congregation of martyrs that Nietzsche despised.

It is easy to become proud of such things when one is a Christian. But that is not why we are gathered for worship. We are gathered for self-examination.

Trollhättan is Corinth, we may suppose. Every “congregation” is Corinth. There were not many “of noble birth” when the congregation began in Corinth, not much of an upper class. And the problem in Corinth was this. What marked the world but did not mark Jesus Christ — grabbing advantages for oneself, looking down on those who lack something — forced its way into the congregation, and it damaged the fellowship in the congregation. As the world does, so he does not, he who went toward the cross. In some strange way he looked up to those who lacked something. It is a remarkable respect he shows the woman who had gone astray at the well of Sychar and the sinful woman in Simon’s house.

When we call our text the “Epistle,” it is because today is Sexagesima, and that Sunday has this epistle — according to the “readings of the first series,” as it is called in the new Gospel Book of 1983. This is new. 1 Corinthians 1:20–25 was not the epistle for the day before. Why has this text been put in now? Because Sexagesima has become “Reformation Day.” We used to have four days of prayer in the Church of Sweden. The second was Reformation Day, usually in May. They disappeared because the proclamation of the days of prayer issued by His Majesty the King disappeared. The Church of Sweden is on its way to becoming a free church. But some members who had brought motions in the Church Assembly refused to throw away Reformation Day. They won, and “the Reformation” was placed as the theme on the day that has always had the name “The Word of God” — or “God’s Clear Word”; today the heading reads “The Living Word” — when the sower’s fourfold field is the gospel.

To understand Paul’s words in the letter to Corinth, we need today to think of two important points in the Reformation, Luther’s Reformation. The first is the connection between smallness and “righteousness.” The tax collector in the temple does nothing. He beats his breast and says, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.” The other man lists his “good works.” But the tax collector “went home again righteous rather than the other” (Luke 18:14). It was not hypocrisy on the Pharisee’s part when he listed his merits. He was better than the tax collector. But not in his heart. There pride ruled, just as in Corinth. And before God it is “the heart” that “decides the whole matter.” God sees into the heart. And that is why purity ruled in Corinth at the beginning: not many “wise,” not many strong and splendid people. There was empty space where God could enter. That is where God can do something great. A self-righteous person God cannot “raise up,” but a sinner he can raise up, heal, and take into his service.

This view of discipleship as a combination of weakness on the human side and power in what God gives to the weak can sometimes sound miserable, but it is full of health and healing. From the Reformation this view of the Christian life has flowed into the Swedish revival. It found a clear expression in Rosenius:

*“O what wonders the saints are:
they live in blessedness, yet sigh so heavily;
they are so high,
yet see it so little;
they dwell in God’s stronghold, yet seldom have peace.”*

But with that we have already arrived at the second point in the Reformation that has to do with our text today. Rosenius speaks of the saints, that is, of those who have come furthest. It is they who “sigh so heavily.” It is they who do not see their “righteousness” but do as the tax collector did and cry, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This is Luther’s teaching on “temptation” (*Anfechtung*). The evil is something that must die in a person — and it does not truly die until our bodily death. There is the anguish of death in sanctification. We still have something in us that must die. And because we still have the evil in us, as “a remnant that will not die,” things can go in the congregation as they went in Corinth. Pride rears up inside the congregation. “Contempt for the weak” rears up inside the congregation.

Sanctification means going back to the starting point. That is why Paul writes as he does. He reminds them how it was at the beginning: then you were not so remarkable. Turn back there. Become small before God, so that he can make something of you.

This is something the New Testament stresses sharply in other places. The best example is Peter, “the rock of the church.” He belonged to the apostles whom Jesus chose first, and he was the first of all to confess Jesus as the Messiah. Yet he failed at the last, when the adversities came. He slept in Gethsemane, he denied at the charcoal fire outside the high priest’s house, and he fled, with the other eleven.

What John tells in his twenty-first chapter about the event by the Sea of Tiberias — the three questions the Risen One puts to Peter, the threefold command “Feed my lambs,” “Be a shepherd for my sheep” — is two things held together into a unity. First, forgiveness for all that had been wrong in Peter. And second, his restoration to the task of being an apostle, the renewal of

discipleship on the ground of forgiveness. So it is precisely this that Paul urges the Corinthians to do: Turn back to the starting point. Become small again, become a child, become one who owns nothing but who — for that very reason — only receives, receives from God.

The wrongs for which Peter receives forgiveness by the Sea of Tiberias are wrongs he committed when he was an apostle, yes, which he committed when he was “the rock of the church.” They are not wrongs that lie far back, before this time as a disciple. For us this means that we sin in the congregation, as people sinned in the congregation in Corinth. For such sins too there is forgiveness in Christ.

That is why our text from the first letter to Corinth is, on Reformation Day, a gospel for us, here in the congregation. We know that our conscience troubles us. We know how readily one pulls oneself together and thinks, “Yes, I have my faults, but on the whole I am pretty good.” That will not do to live on. The only thing that holds is forgiveness, “justification by faith alone.” For this Christ himself has instituted forgiveness in the congregation: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven him” (John 20:23).

We now sit in silence for a short while. Each of us thinks about what it is in our own life that needs to be forgiven. After that we will hear the word of forgiveness, the absolution from guilt, this liberation that Jesus Christ himself has instituted.

“Do you desire with a sincere heart ...” Amen.

Translator's notes. The heading reads “Predikan på Sexagesima den 10/2 1985 i Trollhättans missionskyrka,” that is, 10 February 1985 in the Mission Covenant church at Trollhättan. “Anfäktelsen” is rendered “temptation,” with Luther’s German term Anfechtung added, since Wingren refers to Luther’s teaching. The Rosenius stanza is translated for sense, not as verse. The confession question that ends the typescript is abbreviated there with a row of dots (“Begär du av uppriktigt hjärta.....”), and it is given here in the same shortened form. Wingren’s underlinings and capitals (“RENHET,” “TOMRUM,” “Högmodet”) are not reproduced; his small slips in the typescript (“förlåtesle,” “Upsståndne,” “ine”) are passed over silently.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·