# 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

**2**When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. **2**For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. **3**And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. **4**My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, **5**so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

**6**Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. **7**But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. **8**None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. **9**But, as it is written,

“No eye has seen, nor ear heard,
    nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

**10**these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. **11**For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. **12**Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. **13**And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

**14**Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. **15**Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny.

**16**“For who has known the mind of the Lord
    so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ.

# Matthew 5:13-20

**13**“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

**14**“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. **15**No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. **16**In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

**17**“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. **18**For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. **19**Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. **20**For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

# Sermon: The Heart of Christ

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This world is getting pretty ugly. Whenever I turn on the computer or look at a newspaper I am reminded again how far from God we live. Even the local paper is depressing – this morning the banner story was a rehashing of a murder back in 2010 up on Windham 6.

More troubling than individual crimes, however, are the broad social attitudes. Last year at this time everyone was worried about the one percent – the greedy rich people were taking all the economic growth, not paying taxes, and generally working the system for their own benefit. Never mind that by global standards we are all part of the one percent, but it was still popular to hate on them.

A year later those same pundits are telling us the problem is not the one percent - it was never the one percent – the problem are the Mexicans and illegal aliens. They’re pouring into the US, taking their women and their jobs – build a wall, make it strong, make it tall!

We have plenty of foreign workers in our community during the warmer months, though I don’t think they’re taking any jobs that any of us want. The jobs have gotten so bad that the only way to fill them is to import people who have much lower expectations and standards of living than we do, but it’s easier not to think too hard about these things – the point is good jobs are harder and harder to find, and these people look different, so up with the wall!

Illegals are soon to be deported en masse from the US, and of course rounding up illegals requires internment facilities – thinking back to second world war images here – people are starting to walk across the Canadian border seeking sanctuary before they are rounded up and put into camps.

Homeland Security is going to start releasing a weekly list of crimes committed by undocumented immigrants to further inflame public opinion. There is a travel ban for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen – the courts have spoken against this and now we will begin to see which institutions obey the courts and which obey the president. I’m not sure this was ever about the ban, which was only supposed to last 90 days anyway, as it is more of a loyalty test for the security forces of America.

We’re afraid of foreigners, more specifically Muslim foreigners, ones like the man shot at the Louvre over the weekend. We’re less afraid, though still concerned, about white guys with guns. Perhaps because we don’t attend mosque so we don’t have to worry about being targets of white rage.

The point is, we’re seeing a lot of hate. Hate against Muslims, hate against Christians, hate against immigrants, hate against women, hate against gays – even hate against hate. We are truly living in an age of outrage where all of society’s ills are put at the feet of various groups. Those groups change every day, but that’s ok, we don’t mind so much who we’re venting on as long as we have somebody to blame.

You see, it’s all about the scapegoat. It seems we can deal with disappointment and we can deal with hardship and we can even deal with persecution as long as we have somebody to blame - somebody to hate. So long as we’re not the one on the bottom of the pile we seem to be ok. The problem is, the scapegoating system doesn’t address the root of any problems. Scapegoating is like putting a band-aid on cancer.

Let me tell you a story of a boy who was scapegoated. It started when he was young – to most people he was a nobody – just another brown boy in a village in the middle of nowhere. He lived in territory that was under military rule; another country had taken over and was shaking down the citizenry, exploiting the riches of the country and taking the profits back to the homeland.

During the time of a particularly brutal dictator the boys’ family had to flee, fearing for their lives. They crossed borders on foot, carrying their few possessions on their backs. Some time later they returned, hoping that the heat had died down, and they laid low for a while. They had to settle in a different village than the one they left, but considered themselves lucky to just be back in their own country.

This refugee kid grew up, all the while under the shadow of military occupation, and when he came of age he began to speak. People began to listen. He spoke of a new kingdom – a new way of living. He spoke of radical ideas like living for one another rather than living off one another, of healing rather than breaking. He spoke of a Father in heaven, describing him not as a punisher, but as a provider. This refugee spoke a message of hope.

Of course this was disruptive – hope is a dangerous thing to those who seek to oppress. The people were restless and the authorities thought that if they killed this man then people would settle down and keep paying their taxes to Caesar, they would stop grousing and complaining. They would remain docile and obedient to Rome. Apparently these occupiers didn’t know the Jewish people the way God did!

The religious authorities thought the same thing. If only this rabble rouser were killed, then the people would come to the temple and pay their temple taxes, offer their sacrifices, everything would be in good order – predictable and proper. Of course, nobody considered that the people were unruly because they were oppressed by the Romans and that their own religious establishment were collaborators in the effort. No, they thought, if only we could kill that homeless Jew, then everything will be alright.

And so that’s just what they did. They killed him. Nailed him to a cross. The women were wailing, the men standing far off, not able to come close lest they be associated with the object of rage, not coming close because they were not willing to meet their Lord’s eyes.

Society vented its rage on its victim – poured all their sins on him – their hatred, anger, frustration, jealousy, impotence. And left him to die. And die he did. But, he didn’t take their sins away -as they gazed upon his lifeless corpse all they could see was the aftermath of their sin. The light was gone, but the sin remained. They stood appalled at what their anger had done.

All their hate, all their rejection -it accomplished nothing but to reveal the ugliness of the people. Hate cannot solve anything. Violence never settles anything. This is what Jesus taught us. This is the message of the cross. Violence is always ugly, it is always an abomination.

Probably none of you have heard of Catholic priest Father Rene Robert. Fr Robert devoted his life to helping society's most troubled people, including convicts and the mentally ill. Truly, this was a man who had a heart for those people that most of society writes off. The work he did wasn’t glamourous – it didn’t attract attention. He just quietly worked away, loving the unlovable. His ministry was dirty and messy, and it was dangerous. He associated with people that most of us would shy away from. This all caught up with him last spring – Father Robert was reported as missing.

The next day the priest’s car was pulled over and the driver arrested. It turns out that this man had asked the priest for a lift in Jacksonville, Florida, then had abducted him and killed him, leaving his body in the woods of Georgia. As the story unfolded, police learned that Father Robert had been ministering to and helping the very man who ended up killing him.

This is a sad story; sometimes it is true that the hand that feeds gets bitten. Father Roberts’ bishop said in an interview that the priest ‘was well aware for the potential violence that might involve his ministry, but he cared for those people nonetheless.’ In fact, and this is the remarkable part of this story, Father Robert was so aware of the potential for violence in his ministry that he wrote a letter in 1995 which he had notarized by a lawyer and placed in his personnel file in his diocese. The contents of this letter are amazing.

It reads, in part, ‘I request that the person found guilty of homicide for my killing not be subject to or put in jeopardy of the death penalty under any circumstances.’ He asked that his killer be spared execution ‘no matter how heinous their crime or how much I may have suffered.’

Twenty years before being murdered, Father Robert foresaw that his ministry with at risk people would likely lead to his own death, but Father Robert determined ahead of time that he did not want to be avenged. Think about that for a moment. This man anticipated his own murder, and thought about the best response to it.

He didn’t ask that his killer not be punished, he’s no bleeding heart who is claiming that the perpetrator is the victim, but he was wise and he understood that ‘imposing a sentence of death as a consequence of killing only perpetrates the cycle of violence in the community.’ Wow. Stunningly Christlike.

This is an extreme example. The advance forgiveness of the priest is extreme. The murder done by the man he was helping was extreme. It’s unlikely that any of us will either be murdered, or be a murderer. However, we shouldn’t be quick to dismiss this story as being irrelevant to us. In the reading from Matthew that we heard this morning, the very next line Jesus said is ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.’

Our anger is murder. Our words of insult make us legally liable, our words of condemnation condemn us to the fires of hell. We can be violent without ever picking up a weapon.

Jesus said ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. It’s not just what we do, it’s that what we do teaches others, so that what we do gets perpetuated.

So when we return to the social and political climate of the day and talk about breaking or annulling the law, the law that we should be considering is murder, which Jesus defined as anger or hate. Anyone who hates, and who teaches others to do the same……

Our culture has much hate in it. There is the hate that builds walls and demonizes foreigners – there is also the hate that dehumanizes the opposition and uses social pressure to enforce conformity to their own ‘higher’ standard. As society becomes ever more polarized there is plenty of hate and violence on both the progressive and conservative sides. Intolerance rules the day.

But Paul writes that ‘Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny.’ We stand apart from our culture, we are not under the law of our culture. We are not supposed to be concerned with majority opinion, we are not supposed to worry about what others think of us.

‘I am sending you out like lambs among wolves,’ Jesus said. ‘They will hate you because of me.’ The world is going to hate us anyway. I know that’s tough for many to hear, but this is what Jesus promised. If the world doesn’t hate us, then it’s probably because we don’t look enough like Christ – but the point is we should never be seeking the approval of the world. We are to live counter-culturally.

Following Jesus is extremely hard. It demands that we give away our most prized possession – our security of being well liked, respectable, and holding the popular opinions. There might be political, economic, financial, and safety reasons for implementing policies that harm people, but there are certainly no gospel reasons. Likewise, there may be a great deal of public approval for using violent protest as a means to shut down demagoguery and totalitarianism, but that is not at all what Jesus taught. We need to stand against both extremes.

The early church understood what being counter-cultural meant. Those first Christ followers who refused to bow to the emperor and go along with the policies of the Roman government found out in a hurry how much the world could hate them. But still they gave everything for the purpose of serving Christ and serving others; they chose to dedicate their lives to the truths of Jesus rather than the ideals of the ruling empire.

Our ruling empire spews hate – but we are called to speak and to act in love. We are called to condemn violence done to Christians in the Middle East, and violence done to Muslims in North America and Burma. We condemn violence toward women, gays, those with gender issues. We condemn violence done to blacks, Asians, and native and indigenous people around the globe. We even condemn violence done to white supremacists, and others that we find offensive. We stand against it all.

Not because those other people are like us. They may be, they may not be. Neither do we stand alongside others because of what they believe. We stand against hate and we stand against violence because of what we believe. Because we are Christian. Because we follow the scapegoated victim of both political and religious violence, we cannot condone violence against any other. If we learn nothing else from following Jesus, at least we should have figured out that.

Picking on the weak will never make us strong, only divided, and the politics of division go directly against the reconciling movement of God.

For those who may still be confused about the relation between faith and culture and think that Christianity is just some component that we tack onto our cultural identities I’d like to point something out to you.

This congregation traces its roots back to Jabez Culver in 1792. That means that this worshiping Christian congregation is older than the country in which it resides. Anyone who might be struggling about the precedence between Christian values and Canadian values ought to let that fact inform their thinking.

On the topic of thinking, Paul writes, ‘we have the mind of Christ.’ We also have the heart of Christ because we have the Spirit of Christ. We know what is right; we know what we are called to do. We heard it last week.

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before your God.

Amen.

Let’s pray.

God of loving-kindness,

creator and sustainer of all,

you hold all life and souls in your hands.

You sent Christ into the world

as the Prince of Peace

to a world that is too often violent and tragic.

We come to you in prayer in

the face of violence and hate;

we come to you in grief

for those whose lives are cut short or forever changed;

we come to you in anger

because of the violence and hate in the world;

and we come to you in confession

for our complicity in a culture of violence

and for times when we have been silent

in the presence of hateful words

or inactive in the presence of violence.

Give us understanding to comfort those in loss;

give us wisdom to be voices of peace in moments of chaos, tension and fear;

give us courage to be a force for change in our communities;

and give us strength to help build your kingdom of

reconciliation, love and peace in this world.

And in your grace, let us see the day when the words and weapons that destroy life are

transformed instead into instruments of peace and healing.

We gather in prayer to ask these things in Jesus’ name.

Amen.