Message: "The Things Knowledge Cannot Know"
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

2When 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, "What 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.

How many people here went to Sunday School? How many people here taught Sunday School? Very good – then you'll likely catch on to where I'm going this morning. For you see, every Sunday School teacher on earth has been asked "THE QUESTION" by one or more of their students. Ah, yes, I remember it well – the first time I was asked "THE QUESTION" that all Sunday School teachers are asked eventually. I was teaching fifth and sixth grade Sunday School at my home church, the First United Methodist Church in Boulder, Colorado. I was approaching the apex of my pre-seminary theological education and found myself asked by my church, at the mature age of 20 years old, to teach Sunday School. How wise of my church to ask me, I thought; I was such a good candidate to teach Sunday School, I thought – I was young (most of my Sunday School teachers had been at least the age of Moses when he overlooked the promised land); I had attended church regularly (if not reluctantly; my parents made me go!), I owned my own Bible (which the church gave to me when I was in the fifth grade) and

knew where to find the table of contents (one of the biggest requirements of teaching the Bible, so I thought), and I knew the Lord's prayer almost by heart (it helped that our bulletins had it copied inside the bulletin). Thinking I was thus fully credentialed to teach Sunday School, I entered that year with confident enthusiasm – which lasted precisely two Sundays in, when I was asked "THE QUESTION" by one of my students.

And just what is "THE QUESTION" all Sunday School teachers get asked? "If God created the world and everything in it in seven days, when did the dinosaurs live?"

I don't know exactly why children fixate upon such questions; maybe it's the universal appeal of prehistoric biology, maybe it's the human fascination over anything that is big enough to eat you, maybe it's the innate desire of every student to find things that make the teacher squirm, but whatever the reason, that question seems to come up somewhere in every Sunday School teacher's experience. It sure did in mine – and I vaguely remember my attempt at an answer. I thought about saying "God made dinosaurs on the fifth day with all the other animals but decided not to mention them because they're so scary," but I thought that might make the children even more interested in them (kids are sometimes fascinated by scary things) and they'd find more difficult questions to ask. I thought about saying "Ancient Judaic time-space continuums were cyclical in nature rather than linear," but envisioned the blank stares I would receive in response (and I realized I didn't understand that answer very well myself). I thought about saying the page of the Bible which talked about dinosaurs was lost in Noah's flood, or that the dinosaurs were Adam and Eve's pets that didn't work out, or that Jurassic creatures were God's first attempt at making animals but he made mistakes, or that God quickly got rid of dinosaurs when he realized that Eden would never work out if humans were constantly on the menu. My mind fluttered with such nonsense for just a moment, but what I remember most was the feeling of panic I felt for not having a clear and comprehensive answer which I believed the children wanted. In the end, more out of desperation than wisdom, I gave the weakest answer that I knew to be true. I told that child, actually I told the entire class, that "I don't know."

That was one of the most profound moments of my Sunday School teaching career, when I was cornered by a question that forced me to retain the mystery of God – and discovered myself introducing the children in my class to a God who could not be pinned down.

It was an incredibly important introduction, to them but also to me. I became accustomed to telling those children that "I don't know" about a lot of things, I don't know how Jonah survived in the belly of a fish, I don't know how trumpeting broke down the walls of Jericho, I don't know how Jesus walked on the water. But as they were patient with my lack of clarity, I discovered they became more expansive with their questions especially when they had no clear answers. I found that those kids were able to explore the mystery of God without demanding clarity, that the times I said "I don't know" to them when they asked certain questions did not shut them down but carried them into new questions, questions with partial answers that opened up new questions, deeper questions, more significant questions. All of this progressed their understanding and mine about God's nature and will and Jesus's life and ministry and the Spirit's movement and communication, none of which can be perfectly pinned down -- but when pursued such questioning can lead to faith's encouragement and meaning's deepening and truth's refinement. God remains a mystery we must pursue; questions with murky, messy answers motivate that pursuit; prematurely answering questions of God ends that motivation, and settles for a God of our own design – which doesn't exist.

This is the point Paul is trying to get across to the Corinthians in our passage today. Paul is not speaking to Sunday School children but to people who are trying to make faith into something it isn't -- they are attempting to define faith as knowledge about God, proper knowledge about who God is, how God works, and especially who God favors. They force answers upon the question of God, answers shaped to appease human perception, answers meant to pull the puppet strings of the divine for an artificial clarity which is easily exploitable for human gain.

Paul is giving a simple caution here -- Beware of making knowledge of God more important than relating to God. Knowledge of God is a wonderful thing, but a very limited thing; it is easily forced into false conveniences expedient to human agendas. Many are those who claim to know God's will while doing altogether ungodly things – and there are so very many examples of this today. We have presidents holding up Bibles as visible signs of righteousness, leaders justifying genocide for territorial gain, white supremacy being promoted as a divinely-favored status, Christian nationalism being proclaimed as God's plan, cultures that happen to not be Christian being called garbage, and colonization being reintroduced as if such things fall naturally under God's will. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Paul is saying something very disconcerting to those for whom knowledge is the greatest good, but something very encouraging for those who remain open to the mysteries of God – relationship trumps knowledge. Paul is saying to the Corinthians and to us today that the ultimate reality of God lies beyond words, beyond ideas, beyond feelings and sensations and imagination, beyond scriptural accounts and doctrinal formulations; all of these things point to God and help us understand and apply God's will but have no hope of revealing God to any of us. God does that; we don't. The hope of our faith is that God makes himself known to us, that God enters into our reality to tell us what we could not otherwise hear, to explain what we could not otherwise understand, to reveal what we could not otherwise perceive. God makes himself known to us – and we can receive this only IF WE ARE OPEN TO THE MYSTERY THAT GOD IS. God makes himself known to us IF WE DO NOT MAKE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THE ONLY PRIORITY. The knowledge of God that matters comes through our relationship with God, and not the other way around. It is relationship that leads to knowledge, not knowledge that leads to relationship.

I think about it this way: I can know all about someone by reading their biography – but I can't really know who they really are without personal connection. Bringing it closer to home, I can know all the details about my grandchildren from their parents, everything from their birth weight and size to their favorite flavor of ice cream (vanilla) to their penchant for particular bugs (earthworms) or games they like to play (connect four) to what makes them laugh or cry (still working on those!); but I cannot really know who my granddaughter or grandson is without spending time with them exploring their world on their wonderfully curious, innocent, spontaneous level. Being with them carries me much further to knowing who they really are, far beyond what words and statistics and descriptions can convey. This applies to anyone we truly wish to know – including God.

These are some very hard truths Paul is telling us today – very hard truths that are essential if we are to commune with God, the real God, the only God that Jesus revealed. If your faith depends upon knowing certain things absolutely, it is not faith in God, who is not to be absolutely known. If your faith insists that belief is a rigid thing without any room for differences, it is not faith in Jesus who insisted on paying attention to the people and the thoughts that didn't fit with human understanding. If your faith requires comprehensive adherence to concrete ideologies or carefully-worded creeds and doctrine, it has little chance

of embracing a God who refuses to be pinned down by such formulations. In a sense, it comes down to one of two priorities we choose – make knowledge of God the goal of ones life, or make relating to God the goal of one's life. Pursing knowledge of God is not much more than a mental exercise or theoretical musings that are intellectually interesting but substantively empty; knowing God or relating to God, on the other hand, carries with it the knowledge God imparts to us directly, to help us know what's worth knowing.

In short I have learned the value of not knowing everything, especially regarding God. I've learned that acknowledging I don't know something about God is not bailing on the answer; it is being honest regarding the question. It is the foundation of humility that we acknowledge our limitations regarding the divine so that God may enter into those limitations and work what we cannot work ourselves. Paul puts it this way: "What 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."

In other words, when it comes to God, it's not what you know, but who you know -- or maybe who knows you -- that matters.