

**Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany + February 19, 2017**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI**  
**1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23**

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

I love so much about Atonement Lutheran Church. Of course I love you, its people. I also love our beautiful, warm sanctuary with its historic stained glass windows. And I love the building's Neogothic Revival architecture with its irregular form, steeply pitched roof, Gothic arches, buttresses, and of course its tower.

Another distinctive feature of Neogothic Revival style is the building's solid-ness. Thanks to the church's founders, we have entrusted to us a very solid structure made of cement blocks on a foundation that is some 2½ feet thick. It has stood the test of time for 112 years, and will continue to endure for at least as long as any of us are around.

Paul uses the metaphor of a master builder in his exposition of faith in our reading today from his first letter to Corinthians: "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ."

Paul wrote this letter out of concern for the church in Corinth, a large cosmopolitan city located on the narrow isthmus that connects the Pelopponesian peninsula to mainland Greece. We know from the Book of Acts that Paul arrived there on his second missionary journey. He taught about Jesus Christ wherever he could, and every Sabbath he would go to the synagogue and try to persuade people there to trust in Jesus as their Messiah. But as is often the case with prophets and apostles, the more people that came to believe in Christ, the more opposition to Paul sprang up. Because of

this Paul was tempted to leave, but God spoke to him in a vision, recorded in Acts 18: “Do not be afraid; speak and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.”

So Paul remained in Corinth for a year and a half, getting a church established and laying down Christ as the sure foundation, the cornerstone, for the church’s life and ministry. He then left for Ephesus, where he stayed for three years. During that time he began to get reports that things weren’t going so well at the young church in Corinth. Serious disorders had begun to infect the congregation. These included verbal abuse, drunkenness, idolatry, divisions between members in which some were even taking others to court, and sexual immorality. In the midst of this, Paul’s own authority was apparently called into question.

This is why Paul felt he had to write his letters to the Corinthians. In his first letter, Paul is especially critical of those who boast they have special religious wisdom or knowledge. The church in Corinth had been weakened because of shaky theology that had been laid on top of what Paul had done. It was as if after the foundation of our building was laid, a new construction company came along and did a shoddy job with the walls and columns, making the whole structure vulnerable to cracks and perhaps even collapse in even a moderate earthquake.

The real problem in Corinth wasn’t simply the acts of disobedience and disunity. Rather, it was that worldly wisdom had gotten the upper hand. People thought they knew everything, and wanted to control others by forcing their own agendas onto them. This was the opposite of what Paul had taught. In Chapter 2 of this same letter, Paul wrote that “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Christ and him crucified.” That is, he wasn’t telling them all the answers to life’s questions, as he saw them. All he wanted them to know was that Jesus on the cross, the suffering man, the broken body, the Son of God given for our sake, taking all the world’s sin upon himself that our sins

might be forgiven, is the defining revelation of God and of the human condition—in a world that is still ruled by principalities and powers.

But people were sowing seeds of discord in Corinth, and had come to believe their own wisdom was superior. They thought they were right about every little thing and accused others of being wrong in ugly, confrontational ways. They used alcohol to avoid seeing life as it really was. They substituted idols for the one true God because those were more convenient and less challenging. They sued one another over petty grievances. They committed adultery because they allowed sexual desire to trump the sacred vows of marriage.

We are often guilty of much the same, though not in such flagrant ways. But many of us do not like to think that we have all the answers. Instead of welcoming other points of view and listening to all sides, we are quick to judge and condemn. This is particularly true in our current political climate. Many people get their news from a single source that fits the world view they already have. As one who used to work for a reputable daily newspaper, I can tell you that this is a problem. For one thing, why read the news from the source that fits only your own view of the world? That's not even news—it's a kind of mass media comfort food. And you cannot know the whole story from any one news source. You have got to read widely, weigh various perspectives, and above all seek out reports that are based on facts, on things that indisputably happened. The facts aren't hard to find. For anyone with a computer, they are no farther away than a few mouse clicks. And if you don't have a computer or Internet access at home, David Rounds has generously offered to give anyone who wants it their own e-mail address through Atonement Lutheran Church, and unlimited use of our chapel computer during office hours.

What I'm saying is that it's important to see the world as it really is, and not to be misled by people who think they have all the answers. But the real issue in today's reading is the paradox of

faith that Paul puts his finger on squarely: “If you think that you are wise in this age,” he writes, “you should become fools so that you may become wise.”

The closer Christ calls us to him, and the more our faith is strengthened by this call, the more we realize how we must trust God in all things and not our own knowledge. We must become fools, in the sense of those who are simple, open, and trusting. Proverbs 3 puts it perfectly: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” To follow our own understanding is to take a crooked path that could lead us right off the edge of a cliff.

What can we know? Only that God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, loves us infinitely and desires to be in relationship with us. That God the Father gave his only begotten Son for our sake. That Christ took all the sin of the world upon himself so that we could experience God’s limitless forgiveness and mercy. That in no way do we deserve this grace, but that it comes to us anyway through a love that is deeper, broader and higher than we can ever imagine.

The path to true wisdom is to set aside our high opinion what we think we know, and to become willing to be taught by God. As we prayed in our psalm today, “Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes.” True wisdom is to trust and believe in God with all your heart. This is the way of the holiness code, as we heard in Leviticus, and it is the way of those who inherit God’s kingdom, those of us who receive Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which continues in our Gospel reading today. Jesus is telling us how we are to live: We are not to get back at people who wrong us, in the manner of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” which only fuels hatred with more hatred. Instead, we are to love those who do bad things just as God loves us—with infinite mercy and forgiveness. For who among us has not sinned? Who among us is not in desperate need of God’s grace? And who among us has not been boundlessly thankful that God keeps forgiving and loving us anyway? + Amen.