1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Spiritual but not religious. This has now become a common saying among the population in the past few years. I have mentioned this a few times already in my sermons and it really pertains to this text because here Paul talks about being spiritual. Most people recognize that there is more to this world than meets the eyes, that there is actually a spiritual side that science cannot explain. Most people would acknowledge that being spiritual is a good thing, but here's the problem, apparently one can become spiritual but not religious. It means that I can have my own beliefs and practices apart from churches or as they like to call it, "organized religions", because as long as you are good, then you don’t need other people telling you what to do, especially not churches and their rituals and ceremonies and most especially doctrines. As long as you are good then this God or higher being will leave you alone and you will probably get a good life and will eventually end up in heaven. This is a common belief today, and unfortunately it's quite rampant in Christendom.

The problem that existed 2000 years ago in Corinth is still present with us. Calling oneself spiritual does not make you a spiritual person, and certainly does not turn you into a good person. In fact it is simply employing the wisdom of this world under the guise of spirituality, which is no wisdom at all and is despised by God, as we heard in the previous chapter from last week. The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight and it actually hinders his work of salvation. Basically this is man's self made religion according to one's own reasonings, ideas, and wisdom, but completely devoid of the spirit.

But by faith we know at least one thing is from God, his own words as recorded for us by the prophets and apostles in the bible. Now, does the bible talk about morals and being good people? It certainly does, but it demands a higher standard than just being good. God doesn’t want good people, he wants perfect, sinless people. Does the bible talk about living a good life with wealth and health? It certain does, but it is not found in this life. As Paul says later in chapter 15, if only in this life we have hope, we are of all people most pitied. And certainly the bible talks about being spiritual, but it has to come from God, and it comes from the God who came down from heaven and was incarnate of the spirit of the virgin Mary.

The whole teaching of the bible is really summed up in the person and work of Jesus. That's why Paul says that he came to the Corinthians preaching nothing but Christ and him crucified. There is no need to add anything else because the cross of Jesus is the highest wisdom, though we may look at it as nothing. But the forgiveness of sins is the power that renders all evil in this world powerless.

But you might be wondering why I am talking about all these false beliefs, surely we are not like those people, especially not in a Lutheran congregation! Surely we have heard the pure gospel and believed it by the power of the Holy Spirit, therefore we are true spiritual people, not like those self-proclaimed spiritual people. But we would do well to constantly examine ourselves lest we are found to be just like them. For indeed, we quite often misuse and even abuse this passage without even knowing it. Here in verse 15 Paul says that the spiritual person judges all thing but he himself is judged by no one. It seems to say that we can do whatever as long as we have the Holy Spirit by the hearing of the gospel, but is that really what Paul means here? Indeed, the gospel sets us free, a great and wonderful thing indeed, but our sinful nature quickly takes this freedom and runs wild with it. Certainly I don’t expect you good Lutherans to have these outright false beliefs about moralism and good life here and etc, but we still do it in a very subtle way because we still want a religion that can fit inside our head.

2 weeks ago in our Sunday bible study we discussed the nature of prayer. And I think people really don’t like it when I say that there is no power in prayer. Many people often say the "power of prayer" or something to that effect. But tell me, where does the bible ascribe any kind of power to prayer? Where in the bible does it actually say that what we do, say, or think can move God to do anything for us? Prayer does not change God's mind because prayer does not have power. But people don’t like to hear this and so they will just ignore this and continue to believe in the so-called "power of prayer". This is just one example of how we still hold to our own wisdom with regards to spiritual matter, but we turn it upside down.

And this is not only restricted to doctrines but in our practices and Christian life as well. Since we have received the gospel, we are so spiritual that we are not subject to any judgment as verse 15 suggests. And so we end up doing whatever we think it's right. We sin against one another as if it's ok so long as we have the gospel, the forgiveness of sins. Paul would then say, "how can you who have died to sin still live in it? Don't you know that you have been baptized into his death?" (Rm6). In our own doctrinal errors and wicked living, we are no different from all those other people who have other kinds of wrong beliefs.

But once again, it is the death of Jesus that is the real driving force behind everything. To briefly answer the prayer question, the power is not in prayer, then where is the power? If you remember last week's reading from the first chapter, the power is in the cross of Jesus, the power is in his death (and resurrection of course). If we want to use the power language in relation to prayer, then the power only lies in the promise, which is the cross. God only hears and answers prayers on account of Jesus, otherwise, why should he even do anything for sinners? Look at all those prayers in the bible, they are always petitions in view of God's promises, they are recalling God's mercy and grace, which ultimately is found at the cross because that's where the abundance of God's grace is poured out upon us.

This is what it means to be spiritual, it's not about having a halo around your head, but rather, it is to see the cross and actually have the mind of Christ as it says in verse 16. The problem is always the same. It's not that we do not have it, we do by virtue of having the holy spirit working in us through the hearing of the gospel, but we simply do not exercise it. We employ our reasoning and our worldly wisdom, and we fail to think like Christ.

That's why we have these rituals and ceremonies in the church because it helps you think like Christ! What was on his mind throughout his life on earth, or even before that, before the foundation of the world? Even before he created anything he had already decided to go to the cross. The cross was on his mind all along. Can you imagine this paradox? That at his birth, already he was thinking about dying and throughout his entire life, it is for this one purpose. And of course during his ministry it is made abundantly clear that he came to die for the sins of the world, as prophesied in the OT and by John the Baptist also.

He is always thinking about the world, about you and me, and how he can finally win us back by his death for us. In summary, love, grace, mercy, forgiveness of sins, the promises of God, all these were in his mind, which is now yours also in him. And so being spiritual people is not just being good people and it's just claiming to have the Holy Spirit, but that the holy spirit working faith through the hearing of the gospel that gives you the mind of Christ. And it's not just about being imitators of Jesus and seeing Jesus as a good example and teacher, but that our faith is completely dependent upon his cross, his death on our behalf, for the forgiveness of sins, so that we can actually have a new start whenever we are in Christ.

And so in this new beginning called faith and repentance, we have the mind of Christ so that we also have love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and we think about others more than the self. Also, with the mind of Christ, we apply these not only in our Christian living of good works, but also in our understanding of the bible. When we have the mind of Christ, that it is all about Christ and him crucified, his grace and mercy, then you will see that prayer is nothing but beseeching God on account of Christ and him crucified, so that he answers our prayers because of Christ and him crucified for us.

And so we do pray that by the gospel that the spirit would continue to increase our faith so that with this faith we constantly look to Jesus and his cross, so that we may have his mind of love and mercy and grace.