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Wonks and Wisdom
1 Corinthians 2:6-16

When I moved to Washington, DC almost 7 years ago, I stumbled upon a new word. Wonk. I had no idea what it really meant, although it's not a word that sounds like a compliment. But I heard people being described as "wonky," and it didn't seem so bad. And then I saw ads from American University all over the city, citing itself as a home for wonks. And then I noticed a whole section of the Washington Post called the Wonkblog. As it turns out, this city is really into the word "wonk!"

First, for you long-time DC residents, you have to know that this is not a term that everybody else uses. Don't go to Wichita and start talking about wonks or wonkiness, unless you're going out of your way for a blank stare.

Second, I did eventually figure out what it means, realizing that it was referring to somebody with a highly specialized subset of knowledge around policy or the economy. I would also venture to say that there's been a bit of colloquial expansion of its meaning, and you could refer to somebody with high specialized knowledge in a lot of fields as wonks.

I was thinking about this word because I think it's interesting how people learn. More specifically, I'm curious about how people know what they know. If that seems a little wonkish itself, let me explain. We all gain knowledge and learn what is true in a variety of ways. We read books by trusted sources, or learn from trusted teachers. We experiment and test ideas for ourselves. We accept or reject claims about correct courses of action based on our own past experience, or the experiences of others.

The big question here is, how do we know what we know? Philosophers call this particular sub-branch of thinking epistemology.

Now, you don't need to remember that word, but I'd like to posit that, in our wonkish city, we have a functional epistemology, or a set of ways of knowing things. We know things because we're smart, because we worked hard and studied, because we trust people with accomplishments in higher education and the workforce, and because we've been around it for awhile.

Now before moving on, I want you to know that I'm all for that. While I may know nothing about the effects of the Bundesbank's monetary policy on the international

market for soy products, or how particular gene mutations affect lipid counts, I'm really glad somebody does, and in fact I'm sure a lot of you, here in this room, are in fact wonks.

But let me ask a question that I think we're all going to quickly agree on. Have our ways of knowing and learning and gaining expertise made us kinder? Have they made us more compassionate? Have they helped us cross barriers and divisions between peoples? Or is there something else, something less tangible, something that can't be nailed down in a thesis, that helps us know how to be more than right, but also good?

I'd like us to take a moment to broaden our own epistemologies - how we know what we know, and I'd like to do it with 1 Corinthians. In the first chapter, Paul appears to throw a big wrench in the works of our highly educated technocracy. With just a hint of rhetorical mockery, he asks, "Who is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age." Paul is decidedly not impressed by the wisdom of the Greek culture that the Corinthian church lives in.

Perhaps he would make a similar comment to us. "Who is the one who has all the answers? Where is the one with the most degrees? Where is the policy wonk of this age?" Perhaps Paul's mocking tone might rub us the wrong way. I can only imagine that his first readers were at least in part offended by his seeming dismissiveness of their enlightened culture, and fair enough. At first glance Paul seems to take little notice of high-minded education and intellectual culture. And that must have been deeply unsettling for the Corinthians as it may be for us. I am indebted to smart people who have chosen to give of their intellectual resources for the good of many, and I don't think for a moment that they have wasted their time on unworthy pursuits.

So I don't think Paul is so dismissive as he is telling us, albeit with a bullhorn and a crowbar, that it's not enough. Particularly for a person of faith, it's not enough to be smart, or well-educated, or highly experienced, and in fact those things may ring a bit hollow on their own. Yet I don't think the answer is to forget what we know, but instead to understand that what we know is incomplete, and more importantly, how we know what is right and true is incomplete. That there are some things that are unlearnable and unknowable through higher education, experience, or even trusted mentors. That there are some things that can only be known through the power of the Spirit.

Let's pause and confess together that the Holy Spirit can be a bit of a mystery for us Presbyterians. I think we'd pass a basic pop quiz - yes, the third person of the Trinity, God invisibly present, that we pray for the Spirit before we read Scripture, and that the

Spirit is always the third part of the affirmation of faith. Got it. But if it feels hard to go deeper into a conversation about who or what the Spirit of God really is, you're not alone. Believe it or not, in the first draft of the Nicene Creed which came out in 325 AD, when the early church got to the third part, they just gave up and went home. They wrote, "We believe in God the Father, maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is seen and unseen," and then got to the second part and said "and in Jesus Christ, eternally begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father," and on and on, and when they got to the third part, they just wrote "and in the Holy Spirit" and all went down to the pub. It wasn't until 56 years later that they got around to trying to write something with a little bit of substance about the Spirit, which is what we have today.

So the Spirit is a little hard to pin down, and yet for Paul the Spirit is essential - in under 10 verses, he uses some variation on the word over 10 times. In particular, for Paul, the Holy Spirit is essential if these Corinthians are going to patch up their divisions and live as the united community of believers that they are being called to in Christ Jesus. And so, if we're serious about this "united in Christ" business, then perhaps the Spirit is equally important for us as well.

At this point, you're probably hoping that I'm now going to explain the Holy Spirit to you, how the Spirit works, what the Spirit's for. I'm so sorry to disappoint you. Fortunately for me, I can blame it on Paul, because he doesn't do it either. In fact, he's very un-cerebral on this point, and the language he uses is very action-oriented, speaking of the power of the Spirit, and that the Spirit reveals things that are otherwise unknowable. To be fair, he doesn't yet reveal what it is that the Spirit reveals to us, although you will not be surprised to find out later, the things that are revealed are the ingredients to a healthy and unified community, which in shorthand are faith, hope, and above all, love.

But here, in his opening salvo, Paul goes out of his way to make the point that the Spirit simply cannot be grasped, nor theologized, nor made to conform to expectations by conventional human means. Paradoxically, the Spirit both stands outside human understanding, and yet it is the very thing that makes human understanding possible.

Let me ask you this. We know how to do what we do for a living because we've been taught, and we have experience, and we've worked hard. But how do you know what is honest, or decent, or loving, or sacred? What degree can you get to ponder the depths of a parent's love? What continuing education credits can you enroll in that will make you desire justice when a wrong is done. What policy forum can you go to in order to mend

relationships between peoples who seem unchangeably divided against one another? I promise you, not even seminary can do that.

Paul says that “these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.” It’s the sort of knowing that isn’t empirical or even really intuitive. It is a gift, and it’s one that God invites us to ask for. It’s what Paul calls wisdom, and it’s different from the wisdom gained by years and experience. There is for sure an honored place for the wisdom of those who have come before us and have stood in the face of many years of history, but there is a deep mystery to the wisdom that comes from the presence of the Spirit.

We are taking this deep dive into 1 Corinthians because it is at least in part a treatise on what is required for unity across divisions, and Paul wants us to know that it’s going to take hard work, but it won’t happen at all if we are not open to the gift of the Spirit to give us the wisdom to listen to and love one another as the children of God we all are. This is a gift that certainly must be practiced, but it cannot be received without praying for it. And so I’ll add one final related thing that I think we need.

Humility. For the Corinthians as well as for us, in order to be open to the Spirit of God, you have to be open to the idea that you don’t have all the answers, and that you wouldn’t be able to get all the answers by yourself no matter how hard you tried, even if you read all the most spiritual books and went to church more than anybody else. Instead, God wants us to ask for the power of the Spirit, and therefore we need to come to the conclusion that we need the Spirit if we are ever going to live according to the promises given to us in Jesus.

I don’t think any of us, in the time we live in, have fooled ourselves into thinking that breaking down divisions, and living as a united community is easy. We know we are different, we have varied experiences and views, we have different things that give us joy, and different things that keep us up at night, and much of that is how it should be. Unity doesn’t mean being identical, and so we need the wisdom to be different, to disagree well and faithfully, and to agree in love and mutual concern.

Unity in Christ is a gift. The Spirit is a gift. Let us choose to receive that gift with humility and gladness. Amen.