

The Spiritual Snooze Bar

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

February 6, 2011

I.

When I was a child I had an old-fashioned alarm clock. Many of you might remember them. You had to wind up both the clock and the alarm every night. It had two bells on top, you could hear it ticking, and when the alarm went off you had to wake up before it wound down. Otherwise you might go back to sleep and defeat the whole purpose of setting the alarm.

I also have an alarm clock now. But this one has a dangerously tempting and seductive feature. It has a snooze bar; a wonderful invention that allows me to postpone the reality of having to wake up. And it's not just a button but a big long raised bar that's almost impossible to miss.

I have said before that my morning exercise consists of working out on the snooze bar. I do three sets of one rep each.

So what does this have to do with church? Today's reading from First Corinthians describes the perils of using a spiritual snooze bar. Sometimes the alarm goes off and we know we should wake up, but we want a little more time. God always calls us to deepen our faith, and we know we have to do his will, but maybe we don't want to focus on it right now. We'll wake up later.

But this alarm, this call to faith, is very real, and if we become dependent upon the spiritual snooze bar, then we run the risk of putting God on the back burner. Not a good plan. For while God's mercy is great, and his grace is free, and his love abounds, that is for now. The day inevitably will come when we all must account for the content of our lives, and procrastination can have a price.

And every once in a while our readings point out this sometimes inconvenient truth. St. Paul's letter to the church at Corinth did that in a way that also applies to us now. And so, every once in a while, those readings lead to sermons like this. Let's briefly consider a little background.

II.

Most of us generally know that Paul was the Bible's greatest evangelist. He traveled throughout the region around the Mediterranean Sea, and founded churches in the face of hostility and opposition to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While on his second missionary journey he stayed in Corinth a year and one-half, and established a church there (Acts 18:11).

He also received reports about how these churches were doing. And about two years later, while in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, he received a letter from the church at Corinth along with some other disturbing information. So he replied to the Corinthians and prepared them for a visit he planned to make a few months hence (1 Cor. 16:8).

And at this point we also might review some details about the city of Corinth. It was the largest commercial center in the Roman Empire, and had a wide-open lifestyle. There was a Greek verb at the time that meant "to Corinthianize," which was to live shamelessly and immorally. In many ways biblical Corinth was a thoroughly modern city, not unlike today's population centers.

This makes Paul's words even more appropriate. And we should note that he was not writing to pagan Corinthians in order to bring them to Christ, but rather to the church itself at Corinth, which presumably was comprised of those who already had become believers.

But apparently the church then, like some parts of the church now, struggled with how to apply Christ's teachings in their lives. And while the entirety of Paul's letter goes into several specific problem areas, today's reading underscores a basic problem at the foundation of all the others.

III.

And that problem was the church's snooze bar spirituality. Some people were going through the motions of living in Christ, but actually were living in the ways of the world of Corinth.

So Paul spoke of the difference between God's wisdom and the world's wisdom. He said that God's wisdom was hidden from the rulers of the age, meaning those who crucified Christ, and pointed out that no one can know or understand God's will for us except through the Holy Spirit.

And then he explained, "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. 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."

That is a good summary of Paul's point, isn't it? He made a clear distinction between that which comes from the world, and that which comes from God.

And the implications are evident from the next verse where Paul said. "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."

But what does Paul mean by his use of the word "spiritual?" That word probably can have several meanings. We might know people who claim to be "spiritual" but who would not consider coming to church. We probably have heard people say "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious." But would that satisfy Paul? Would it satisfy God?

Unfortunately, the answer is "no." And I don't want to seem judgmental here, or to criticize how others understand their faith. But these also are not my words. They are the words of Paul, in the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit. They are at the foundation of our faith.

So, according to Paul, being spiritual does not mean merely having some vague sense of otherworldliness, or generally believing there is something out there larger than ourselves. And trying to be a good and fair-minded person also is not enough. Certainly we all want to be good neighbors and help the community as we live in the world, but it takes more to live in Christ.

And again, I do not want to be admonitory, nor to discount good things that many people do. But think about it. Atheists also can do those things. People who totally reject God still can be good neighbors and help the community. Those good works can exist in the world, apart from God. The wisdom of the world is not necessarily bad; it's just not enough.

That's because God has called us to believe, and to know him through the Holy Spirit, which is the only possible way to do it. That's what Paul meant by being spiritual. We are not believers because of rhetoric, argument, or even good intentions, but because of God's power in Christ made known to us through the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit brings spiritual wisdom and faith.

And I know some people doubt there is one true faith. They are willing to accept the gods of all religions. But I pray we understand that while tolerance might seem caring and compassionate, it does not make true that which is untrue. And wishful thinking does not make real that which is unreal. Truth is an objective reality based on what is, not what we want to be.

Paul explained that truth to the Corinthians. And we should recognize that he did not insist that everyone should be the same. The Corinthian church was filled with a great diversity of people from all walks of Corinthian life. And Paul called these people to live into their faith from their own personal perspectives based on their own circumstances.

And that's the way it should be. It is clear from the extensive body of Paul's writings that there can be many different paths that lead to salvation in Jesus Christ. There are a variety of ways to come to faith. But even though there may be different points of departure, there can be but one destination in our Lord. And only the Spirit can lead us to that sacred place.

IV.

And for that to happen we are called to give up any dependence we might have on the spiritual snooze bar. The alarm is going off and our eternal souls are dangerously at risk if we say, "I'll get around to this later, but right now I'll just keep on as I am."

And there is equal danger in believing that we can know God on our own terms, or that we can define our own spirituality. I'm reminded of the Christian drama group—not our Amazing Praisers—that was doing a play about the Pentecost. They tried to use real tongues of flame to demonstrate the Holy Spirit, and the church caught fire and burned to the ground.

The point is that spirituality comes from the Holy Spirit and only the Holy Spirit. We cannot manufacture it or use any substitutes. The wisdom of the world might have some useful purposes, but it is not the same as the spiritual wisdom that reveals God to us. Our own understandings cannot replace the knowledge that comes from God.

And it really isn't that hard or that mysterious. We simply are called to put God first. Do you remember several years ago when Avis Rental Cars ran ads that said, "We're number two, so we try harder"? Well, that's us. We can be number two so long as God is number one.

It also might be like the bumper stickers that say, "God is my co-pilot." That's a wonderfully comforting thought, but if it's really true perhaps we should switch seats.

And to further illustrate that idea, suppose we were driving down the road and saw Jesus standing there with his thumb out, hitching a ride. Would we stop and say, "Hello Lord, going my way? Hop right in. Glad to have you along." What's wrong with that picture? The obvious problem is that we would be focusing on the Lord going our way rather than us going his way.

V.

So let me go back again to one of the basics of today's reading. Paul said, "Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them."

And he also said about those gifts, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God."

God wants us to know him through the Spirit. We cannot know him through the ways of the world. The snooze bar will not save us. The alarm is going off we are called to be awake. *Amen.*