

God Wins! The Wisdom of God's Spirit Transforming, but Sublimely and Mysteriously

I Corinthians 2:1-12

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It's Super Bowl Sunday. Two teams from the National Football League – the winner of the American Conference and the winner of the National Conference – will compete for The League Championship this evening. Neither of those teams nor their respective fans want to lose today's game; More broadly, no one wants to be a loser in life. Each of us prefers to be a winner. Each person and team who truly desires to be a winner will do everything it takes to emerge a winner at a contest's end.

Paul the Apostle experienced a radical change in his own life. As the story is told in the Book of Acts, when on his way to an out-of-town work assignment, a divine intervention struck Paul blind in a revelatory encounter with an overwhelming light, a voice, and a presence which seemed like the Crucified and Resurrected Jesus. This encounter temporarily blinded him. Once off the road and in town, Paul was received with caring hospitality by a disciple of Jesus named Ananias. During the time of his recovery and rehabilitation, Paul sensed his life was changing by way of a reorientation and a transformation. He was being changed toward a calling to share the Gospel of God's unqualified love which Jesus embodied and represented (Acts 9:10,12-13,17; 22:12). The mystical experience on the road AND the inexplicable care he received from Ananias changed Paul's life for God in Jesus Christ as "played out" in relationships with all sorts of different people all around the Mediterranean region over the several years until Paul's death. So when Paul writes to the followers of Jesus in and around Corinth the verses we have read and heard this morning, he is commenting and teaching and, in a way, singing a tune describing God's life-transforming ability and efforts. If Paul were here today, I think he would say to us that God wins, but not in a way an athletic sports team or individual wins, and not in a way a choir or band or orchestra wins. God wins, not as opponents are outscored or dominated and humiliated, but God wins through human lives being changed in the short term and over longer periods of time.

As Paul goes forward in his life, he meets people and participates in organizing communities of faith based on following Jesus Christ. He also writes letters of support and of caring admonishment for "coaching up" people as they grow and serve, so they might follow the embodiment of God's love in this Jesus, doing so as individuals and communities with an evolving faith shaped by God. In these verses of this letter to the church in and around Corinth, Paul describes the wisdom of God's eternal Spirit and the transforming effect of that wisdom to change human beings over the course of any person's life and across decades and centuries of history. According to Paul, people experience transformation as we are engaged for a changed-by-God's-love "end" or purpose. This "end" or purpose can be characterized as "sublime" – profoundly "as good as something gets." In addition to sublime, this "end" or purpose is also mysterious. We cannot know empirically "how" transformation from God occurs, except that the source is God; and God's life-giving power and life-shaping-for-service-through-love-desire cannot be exactly known or traced. Yet we often recognize such sublime and mysterious transformative effects when they materialize and when they have developed. Two examples: First, with groups of people realizing transformation by way of shared purpose across decades and centuries; and second, with individuals and personal relationships between them transformed through parts of each one's life-time.

First, the wisdom of God's Spirit transforms groups of people realizing relationships and shared purposes across decades and centuries. For example, groups, communities, and institutions have collections of memories, history, sacrifice, and/or purposes-come-to-life and exemplified, whether these are formalized as traditions or whether informal. For example, (1) Texas A&M, has traditions such as that of "The Twelfth Man," of the "November 18, 1999, Bonfire Dozen," and the April 21 memorial tradition of "Muster." (2) Fort Worth has the Van Cliburn Foundation and Collection, which did not exist until a 23 year old Texan returned home after winning the first quadrennial Moscow International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958. Harvey Lavan Cliburn was accorded the honor of a tickertape parade in Manhattan, which had never happened for a classical musician. (Four years later, Astronaut John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth, would receive the same honor.) On that day in 1958, however,

young Van Cliburn said to the assembled Manhattan crowd: “It thrills me most is that you are honoring classical music, because I’m only one of many. I’m only a witness and a messenger. Yet I believe so much in the beauty, the construction, the architecture invisible, the importance for all generations, for young-people-to-come that classical music will (a) help their minds, (b) develop their attitudes, and (c) give them values. That is why I’m so grateful that you have honored me in that spirit.” And (3) Baylor University has “The Immortal Ten,” from January 22, 1927, when a driver and 20 passengers on the team bus were driving toward Austin for a basketball game. In a blinding rainstorm on the way through Round Rock, in an era before protected rail crossings and overpasses, the driver too late sighted an on-coming train. He accelerated, but the rear of the bus was hit by the locomotive and ten were killed. At a recent 90th anniversary commemoration, students wore t-shirts with the phrase: “They are the we in us.” Are not those six short words an accurate characterization of how every current generation carries forward a tradition shaped by the influence of those who have come earlier in history?

Second, the Wisdom of God’s Spirit transforming individuals and personal relationships between and among them. Fred Rogers made a career of taking people seriously, including children, in the hope of contributing to healing in God’s world. *ESQUIRE* magazine once reported about a teen who was severely afflicted with cerebral palsy and who exhibited significant anger much of the time, but the young man loved watching “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Fred Rogers received notice of this and scheduled an appointment to visit the young man. When Mr. Rogers arrived, after a few minutes, the young man was so nervous that he began biting and hitting himself. The mother excused herself and her son from the room. Mr. Rogers waited patiently. When the boy and his mother returned, Mr. Rogers began talking in his soothing voice, saying to the young man: “I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?” On his computer, the young man typed, “Yes, but what?” Fred Rogers replied, “I would like you to pray for me. Will you?” The boy seemed stunned. Apparently many people, across the years, had told him that they were praying for him, but now he was being asked to pray for Mr. Rogers. He typed, “I don’t know how, but I will try.” His mother told the *ESQUIRE* writer/reporter that since Mr. Rogers’ request for her son’s prayers, the young man stopped talking about wanting to die. He told her that since Mr. Rogers is close to God, then if Mr. Rogers likes him, it must mean that God likes him also. When this reporter asked Fred Rogers about his encounter with the teen and added the comment that he thought this was a very perceptive approach in developing a relationship with the troubled young man, Fred Rogers replied, “Oh, heavens no! I did not ask him for his prayers as a way to help him. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like he’s experienced must be very close to God. I asked him because I truly desire his intercession in my behalf.” (from Tim Madigan’s “I’m Proud of You: Life Lessons from My Friend, Fred Rogers” [2006]; pgs.90-91). The wisdom of God’s Spirit transforms individuals and personal relationships sublimely and mysteriously, within this church, this town, this county, and all around this world.

Isn’t the same true for this congregation? 150 years and God only knows how many individuals have worshiped, studied, prayed, shared, grown in faith, served with love through this church. Paraphrasing Van Cliburn from his referencing classical music and piano proficiency: “In God’s transforming wisdom and love, those who have been part of the faith community here across the decades have been witnesses and messengers, because they believed in the importance – for all generations – to help minds, develop attitudes, and give values.” And paraphrasing from the words of the t-shirts worn in Waco, “Those who have served God by way of the transforming wisdom and love sublimely and mysteriously at work over time – even through history and memories of them – (they)are the we in us.” God wins, not in a way an athletic sports team or an individual may win, not as a choir, band, or orchestra wins, not as opponents are outscored or dominated and humiliated. God wins through human lives being changed in the short term and over the long term. God’s transformative wisdom and love is sublime and mysterious; it is at work and alive anew even beyond a person’s death and unto future generations. It is real and powerful for positive change in the way and spirit of Jesus Christ. What else is more important? You are included. Never forget that. From God’s sublime and mysterious wisdom and grace, every day share the love which you have received, which is at work through you. – All honor and praise be to God.