Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Epiphany 5A
Peace, Seattle
February 6, 2011 epk
1 Corinthians 2:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

AGAINST THE TIDE

The numbers are astounding—even obscene:

- 8 million pounds of popcorn,
- 50 million cases of beer,
- 450 million chicken wings,
- 15,000 tons of chips,
- and enough avocados to cover Dallas Stadium's football field waist deep in guacamole.

All purchased and consumed in the name of one, singular event – the SUPERBOWL. [1]

Over 100 million viewers are expected to tune in to this year's spectacle, and a significant portion of them will be just as interested—if not more so—in the commercials as in the game itself. With air time selling at a record $1 million per second, that's just fine with the marketing gurus who hope to score big with the world's largest single audience.[2]

Juxtapose this gladiatorial exhibition—and the conspicuous consumption that accompanies it—**with the reading from 1 Corinthians, and you get a supreme contrast in terms**.

> "When I came to you," writes Paul, "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God…in lofty words or wisdom…I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified…I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling...not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

It's a remarkable claim to contemplate on Superbowl Sunday.

Straddling one of the Empire's most vital trade routes and with a population second only to Rome's, Corinth was a truly cosmopolitan city. As host to one of the ancient world's great athletic festivals, the Isthmian games, Corinth eagerly welcomed the guests who streamed into the city for that biennial event.[3]

Corinthians were enamored with the varying versions of human philosophy and wisdom, but they were also enamored with money and the things money could buy. A sprawling, open city with a diversity of people from all over the known world, of all the empire's urban centers, Corinth, with its "anything goes" lifestyle, made it the "least likely to convert" to the world's newest religious movement.[4]

What allowed the city to prosper, of course, was the famed *Pax Romana* of the Roman Empire, a prevailing peace ensured by Rome's unrivaled military supremacy and transportation infrastructure.

It was into this climate that Paul came, proclaiming a God whose purpose was discernable not by way of human wisdom, but by the folly of Christ crucified, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

---

[1] Sources for stats include: http://foodiegossip.blogspot.com/2011/02/super-bowl-food-statistics-are-you.html, & http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/19089/super_bowl_sunday_partying_eating_and_pg2.html?cat=19 One less frequently mentioned statistic? The 20% rise in the sale of antacids the day after.
[2] Source: http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-02-03/gm-s-3-million-ads-a-bargain-if-super-bowl-audience-is-record.html,
[3] Richard Hayes, *1 Corinthians, Interpretation Series Commentary*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997) p. 3.
[4] See *Introduction to 1 Corinthians* in the *New Student Bible*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), p. 1182.

Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Like Corinthian culture, American culture has its own obsessions: power, wealth, fame, violence, and youth top the list, and on Superbowl Sunday these cultural obsessions achieve a critical mass that's nearly impossible to ignore.

Not long ago The New York Times Magazine carried an article that compared National Football League locker rooms and Major League Baseball locker rooms.[5] According to the article, walking into a baseball clubhouse gives one an unwelcome feeling; guests feel like outsiders. While if you walk into an NFL locker room, no one tries to make you feel as if you don't belong.

There's a reason for this, according to author Michael Lewis.

- In a baseball clubhouse, it's conceivable for a clubhouse guest to be the physical match of a player;
- But in a football locker room there's no question who really belongs. If your legs don't resemble tree trunks and your upper body a Roman god, it ain't you.

Everyone knows and observes this pecking order, and this puts everyone at ease. As a result, writes Lewis, "The football player doesn't resent you for being in his private place any more than the elephant resents the fly for setting up camp on his tail."

This peace that prevails in an NFL locker room is like the famous *Pax Romana* in the days of Paul.

The peace of Rome, of course, came with a price. It must have been like having a game-ready NFL linebacker in your house day and night. His presence alone would keep things calm and orderly.

Rome's hierarchical way of ordering relationships—from highest and best to last and least—was standard form in Corinth, but Paul was mortified when he learned it was creeping back into the very church community he founded.[6]

When Paul came to Corinth it was not as a power broker but "in weakness and fear and trembling." The gospel he proclaimed was meant to be a radical alternative to the stratification of imperial Rome.[7]

This rankled the elite among those new converts, who could grasp the figure of a heroic warrior but couldn't get their heads around the notion of a crucified God.

Now in his letter, Paul sets out to clear the Corinthian church's foundation of any notion that would compromise the cornerstone of his gospel.

The pull of one's dominant culture is strong. Something in Paul's message had at first caught the Corinthians' attention. They were intrigued. If only they could add a dash of Corinthian hubris into the mix, then the meal Paul was serving would be more palatable.

The problem is, the thing they found most offensive—a crucified Christ as the supreme manifestation of divine wisdom and power—was the core of Paul's proclamation. That God's power for turning the world around would be concentrated in such an exhibition of weakness made no sense to them.

It's incomprehensible to us as well.

---

[5] Michael Lewis, *The Changing Room*, New York Times Magazine, 2/3/2008 http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/03/magazine/03Giants-t.html?_r=1&scp=3&sq=michael lewis february 2008&st=cse Cited, with additional insights, by Roger J. Gench in *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 326.
[6] Op. cit. Gench, p. 328
[7] Ibid, p. 330.

Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

On this day when modern day gladiators take to the field to win glory for themselves, their team, and their sport, while millions cheer, we have lifted before us the gospel's central mystery, which cannot be proclaimed in 'lofty words or wisdom,' in the violent collisions or artful catches on the field of play, nor through the cleverness of Superbowl ad campaigns.

"Instead, it is revealed in weakness & vulnerability, and the self-emptying love of God on the cross."[8]

When Christian communities emulate the world's understanding of power, we cease to be the church and instead slide into a cheap imitation of the power politics to which we have grown so accustomed.[9]

But when, following Jesus' example and command, we act as servants bearing salt and light, we not only find our voice, but are "empowered [by the Spirit] to become the kind of community whose practices bring healing and new life to the world."[10]

Let us pray.
Lord of Life, you come to us in ways and through means that we scarcely recognize, and ask us to believe that your cross is the supreme manifestation of your love and power in history.
Grant us faith to receive this news and to stake our lives on it. And give us the fortitude to proclaim it and live it with lives of witness and service. Amen.

[8] Richard M. Simpson, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 331.
[9] Ibid, after argument by Maggie Ross in *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood, and Spiritual Maturity* (New York: Seabury Books/Church Publishing, 2007), xvi.
[10] Ibid.