I was recently reading an article about collectors of dusty bottles. It was not a term with which I was familiar but I learned that dusty bottles referred to bottles of liquor, mainly bourbon, that were old and rare. It seems that during covid there were several people in the liquor business who had free time, so they started going through their inventory and seeing what they had lying around. Concurrent with this was a locked down population with lots of disposable income. And so, a market was born. Old bottles of booze started selling for very high prices. And the trend continues to this day. One guy they interviewed estimated that he had drunk five million dollars’ worth of dusty bottles. I hope this dollar amount is more indicative of cost rather than quantity. To be completely honest, I am not terribly interested in the subject matter, but I am interested in how things like this get going. The bottles had been sitting around with no one paying them much attention until one day it changed and people could not get enough. So how did this happen? How do we go from individuals ignoring something to suddenly deciding they needed to spend five million dollars on it?

Well, I really don’t know but I do know that the human mind is a funny thing. It can completely disregard something one day and decide it cannot live without it the next. A few years back there was much talk about how a Great Awakening like event was overdue in the United States. If you remember from history Great Awakenings were events where a significant percentage of the population would have a sudden insatiable desire to return to the Christian faith. Obviously, it has not happened recently, but it is interesting to ponder what it would take. What would it take for an apathetic nation to suddenly decide that they could not live without Christianity. In this morning’s epistle St. Paul looks to understand part of this phenomenon by examining what is preventing people from rushing to the Christian faith. In his Letter to the Corinthians, he gives us two things that preclude people from jumping on board with the Gospel message. He says, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” The two groups he identifies both have a sort of mental paradigm which will not allow them to see the truth of what Paul is preaching and so dismiss or ignore it.

It takes a little interpretation to know exactly what signs and what wisdom Paul is talking about but here are a couple of thoughts. The sign that the Jews were looking for most likely would have been the opposite of the Gospel message. That is, they believed that when the Messiah came to earth, He would be all conquering and not end up nailed to a tree. The sign offered by Christianity of Jesus’ messiahship was therefore not the sign they were looking for and therefore they rejected the message. As for the wisdom the Greeks demand it probably has something to do with the Greek philosophical tradition and the fact that the Gospel story did not line up with the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Now my interpretations may be wrong, but the larger point of Paul’s explanation is that there was a way of understanding the world that did not allow these individuals to see and embrace the Christian message. But I don’t think this is a problem limited to the Jews and Greeks of Paul’s era because it is my view that all of us, even those who believe, have some baggage. We all have ways of seeing the world which demand certain things in order to accept the validity of something and so the question becomes what are the mental impediments which prevent us from fully embracing the Gospel message?

To answer that I want to look at the question in the context of something Paul says later in this letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 12 he says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.” From that point he goes on to articulate these gifts, giving us items like wisdom and the working of miracles. But right in the middle of this inventory he lists the gift of faith. In some ways it seems odd because faith is often seen as binary – you either have it or you don’t. If you are a Christian, you have faith and if you are not a Christian then you don’t, at least not faith in God. However, it’s not quite so simple. Just as certain people are smarter than others there are certain people whose faith is greater than others. However, with faith you are not quite as stuck as you are with intelligence because faith is something that can be grown and cultivated. Yes, most of us will not have the faith of those that Paul discusses who have been given that gift, but through prayer and devotion, we can eliminate or at least minimize some of the impediments we have in fully embracing the Gospel message. And since it is Lent it’s a good time to think about removing some impediments.

There is a story of a sculptor who was asked how they went about carving an elephant. They said, “It is simple. You just chip away the stone that doesn’t look like an elephant.” So how do we metaphorically chip away the parts of ourselves that do not look like faith? How do we find and eliminate our own impediments which prevent us from fully embracing the Gospel message? While I cannot speak for any of you, I can at least give you a couple of my own limitations and maybe that will help. The interesting thing for me is that my impediments look a lot like what Paul points out today among the Jews and Greeks. Sometimes I want signs. I want God to do a little more than He is currently doing. And if I am honest the signs I want generally involve stuff that is good for me. I am looking for a sign like a winning lottery ticket. And so, what happens is when things are going well in my life my faith is pretty solid, but when things in my life start to go south, I can get a little dyspeptic. I don’t see the beauty and wonder of God because I am too busy feeling sorry for myself. My faith ebbs and flows based on my current state. My other impediment is not quite the same wisdom as that demanded by the Greeks but it is something akin to it. That is the Greeks wanted a religion delivered to them in a way that scratched just where their philosophical tradition itched. Similarly, I like a very specific type of Christianity and am often blinded to seeing God in other expressions of the faith. Now I think there are very good reasons for why we do what we do here at St. John Chrysostom and have no desire to change that but that should not prevent me from seeing God in other parts of Christendom. I had a seminary professor who said the 11th commandment of the Episcopal Church was, thou shall not be tacky. Now based on the way some of our current bishop’s dress, I am not sure if that is still true, I mean a lot of them look like they picked up something at one of David Bowie’s garage sales. But putting that aside I know that for me tackiness is a complete impediment to my faith. I want a church building that is high Gothic, circa 1225 not something that is architecturally indistinguishable from a dinner theater in Hoboken, New Jersey. But this can be a very limiting way of seeking God and has the potential to stagnate my faith because I can only see God when things are a very specific way.

We are quirky creatures, creatures who are often blinded by our own predispositions and biases. And as we are in Lent it is a good time to examine our quirks and see if they are inhibiting us from growing closer to God so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.