

Sermon: "Purpose over polish"

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I don't know how algorithms assemble what they think I'll like or appreciate but I've been getting this business guy in my feeds lately. He gives unsolicited advice for how to win clients and make lots of money; how to keep the upper hand, how to win the deal. It's not bad advice. But he definitely promotes polish and cunning - and wealth is the goal. "Never let them see you sweat." "Have a take-charge presence." "Command the room."

Nothing wrong with any of that advice. It's common sales advice. His goal for success is to be wealthy and on top of his game.

So what would this business guru make of Paul? Because the way Paul describes it, his work of sharing the gospel, his first impression as a disciple telling the good news of Jesus Christ – well, it was not polished. He didn't command the city square like great orators would have in ancient Corinth. Paul says his presentation was weak. That's how he describes it himself.

I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you with superior speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

I didn't come to razzle dazzle you. I didn't come with a smart slogan or in a three-piece suit. UCC pastor Rev. Kyeong Jung Kim writing for this series says,

Paul reminds the Corinthians that when he first came to them, he did not show up with polished speech or an impressive performance. He came with trembling, aware of his own weakness, so that their faith would not rest on his ability to impress but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Rev Kim says, I imagine Paul standing in Corinth, a major port city alive with clever arguments, dazzling orators, and philosophers as they competed for followers. Paul's presence must have seemed unimpressive, stammering, nervous—no showmanship, no polish, no impressive resume. Yet that was the point. God's wisdom, Paul insists, does not look like what the world celebrates.

The Corinthian church lived in a culture that prized wealth, polish, and competition—and they were tempted to bring those same standards into their faith. Paul reminded them that God's wisdom does not look like the world's wisdom. It is not measured by numbers, status, or polish, but revealed through the Spirit in ways that often seem foolish to the world. [from Rev. Kyeong Jung Kim's commentary]

I caught myself forgetting this wisdom this past week.

This past Tuesday, St. Paul's donated \$5,000 to the Northern Illinois Food Bank to support the Holiday Meal box distribution at ECC. The St. Paul's volunteers who go every month to Old Sherman to distribute food and diapers at the Mobile Food pantry learned that the holiday meal boxes were not going to happen this year. With cost of groceries so high, a major sponsor cut its funding in half. This development came to the attention of our Missions Ministry team and Barb Kamp had an idea. Missions asked the council if we could help by using the interest fund. This is the fund the congregation established last year at the annual meeting in which we set aside the interest of our investments for new ministry at St. Paul's and for supporting needs in the community. Barb asked Rick Green, one of the mobile food pantry organizers "How much do you need to make this happen?" \$5,000. Barb put that out to council. And council responded with a resounding YES. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. I am so grateful for the yeses of this congregation – again and again – to share our resources when we know of a need in the community.

So it was planned that we would present this check of \$5,000 at the Old Serman Mobile Food Pantry when St Paul's was volunteering.

The point person told Barb a special representative was coming to receive the check. They asked Barb if we wanted to write a letter to go with the check. Yeah, that sounded like the professional thing to do. Good idea. So Barb and I talked on the phone. I spent the morning crafting a well-worded letter, laying out our purpose, our gratitude. I called Barb back. We read it aloud. Printed it on church letterhead. And then I thought about what I was going to wear. I was ready to say something if needed.

So Tuesday at 3 p.m. I met our volunteers at Old Sherman who were already in full swing – unloading, bagging food. Unloading and offering diapers. Two rows of cars of guests were already lined up. The real work. The work that mattered was already happening.

All my concern of what to write, and what to say, and what to wear – unimportant. Foolish. The "wisdom of the world" "the wisdom of the age" as Paul calls it – the wisdom that says "be polished" was unimportant to the work of showing up to love one another. The power of God, the wisdom of God was at work in the volunteers preparing food. The wisdom of God was work in the guests showing up to feed and care for their families.

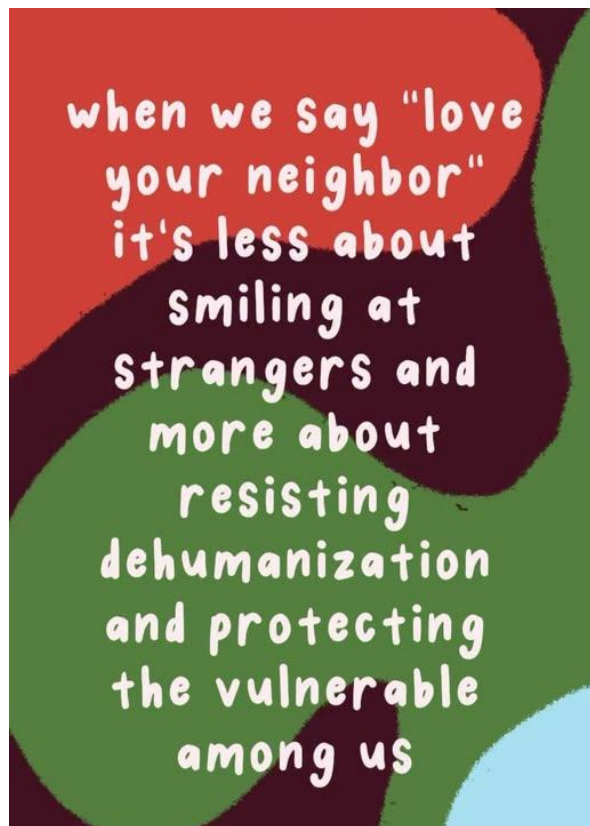
Barb and I met the representative. I had the check in hand. And the rep said, "Let's do this before things get going. I'll go grab the check." Barb looked at me with the biggest eyes – and with high-pitched joy and the biggest smile on her face whispered "I think they have one of those big checks!" Yes, they did! Barb was so proud and grateful that St. Paul's could help provide for families in such a significant way. She was grateful that council's first

reaction to food insecurity is to open our hands and give. I hope all of us share the joy of opening a hand, opening our hearts to give.



Paul says when I came to you, “I decided to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.” He’s asking the people in the Corinth church to remember what compelled them to choose to follow Jesus, to be baptized, to form an *ecclesia* – a church. Paul says, I had no sales tricks. I was not camera ready. I didn’t have polished style or speech. I decided to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. And that’s the good news I shared. I spoke about a God who suffers with us. About God’s son, Jesus Christ whose life, death and resurrection shown God’s gift of grace, forgiveness and mercy. The one who taught that feeding the hungry was feeding Christ himself. About Jesus Christ who emptied himself and took the form of a servant. The crucified Christ whose life demonstrated inclusion and liberation. The one who drew the circle wider and wider. Paul says, I chose to come to you with God’s wisdom of love, justice and community. Remember that wisdom, the power of God’s wisdom. Make your decisions guided by that wisdom.

And what is God’s wisdom for us today? Show up. Be the church. You are already enough. God’s people do not need us to waste time worrying about polish and numbers and the right words. I mentioned earlier that the algorithms get a lot wrong. Well, sometimes they get it right, because this also showed up in my feed:



There's nothing wrong with smiling. It can be the first step to neighborly love and support, and should never be the only step. May God's spirit work within us to reimagine success on God's terms – the terms of love, justice and community. Amen.

[Bible Study and Sermon Commentary for Mark 8:27-38 written by Rev. Larry J. Morris III for the UCC 2026 Stewardship Series: There Our Hearts Will Be.]