

Show & Tell

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Along with his deep love for Jesus Christ, and his deep love for God's good news, the Apostle Paul had a deep love for the people and communities that had been formed by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the good news and through faith in Jesus Christ. This love, whether for the church in Corinth or in Philippi or in Thessalonica — this love served as another proclamation of the good news.

Brothers and sisters, you yourselves know that we did not come to you in vain. Though we had already suffered and been treated shamefully in Philippi, as you know, we had courage, in our God, to tell you God's good news in the face of great difficulty. Because our appeal comes not from delusion or defilement or deception, but, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the good news, so we speak – not to please people, but God, who examines our hearts.

We have never been about verbal flattery, as you know, nor about greedy motives, God is our witness, nor about seeking honor from people, whether from you or anyone else – though we could have been demanding, as Christ's apostles.

But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother caring for her own children. With this sort of deep feeling for you, we are committed to sharing with you not only God's good news, but also our very selves, because you have become so dear to us.

Brothers and sisters, you remember our labor and toil. Working night and day, so as to make no demands of any of you, we proclaimed God's good news to you. You are witnesses, as is God, of how devout and upright and blameless we were toward you who have faith. As you know, with each one of you, like a father with his own children, we appealed to you, encouraged you, and insisted that you should live in a way worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Children's Story

Barry the Badger did not like Sammy the Squirrel. That's putting it mildly. Actually, Barry the Badger hated Sammy the Squirrel. What Barry did like was to cause trouble for Sammy.

One time Barry went around to all of Sammy's friends and whispered in their ears. He whispered all kinds of bad things about Sammy.

“Sammy's stealing your acorns.”

“Sammy thinks he's smarter than you; he thinks he's smarter than everyone.”

“Sammy's trying to take your friends away from you.”

“Sammy's the one who keeps sending you junk email.”

Barry whispered bad things like this to just about everyone who knew Sammy. He was sure that by the time he was done, Sammy would not have one friend left.

Barry was wrong.

You see, everyone who knew Sammy knew Sammy. They knew he wasn't a thief. They knew he wasn't conceited. They knew we wasn't trying to take their friends away. They knew he wasn't sending them junk email.

They knew that Sammy was kind and thoughtful. They knew that Sammy was humble. And each one of them remembered something special that Sammy had done for them.

Barry the Badger was wasting his time. He wanted to make trouble for Sammy, but everyone realized instead that Barry himself was a real trouble-maker. They all knew that Sammy was a good squirrel and a good friend. Nothing Barry the Badger said could change that.

Sermon

Let's say you have to give a speech. I know, I know, that scares most people to death. But let's just imagine it any way. You have a speech to give, and you want to be heard. So, what do you do? You want people to be comfortable with you, to have a sense of who you are, and, on some level, to trust you, trust you enough, at least, to hear what you have to say. In Speech 100 at Calvin College, this was called *establishing ethos*. The idea goes back to Aristotle, maybe farther.

A couple of Fridays ago, I was one of several speakers at First Unitarian Universalist Church. (It was a program to honor their pastor, Mark Belletini.) I had prepared my remarks carefully. People would get a sense of who I am. They would also get a sense of the Christian Reformed Church, that we are fiercely trinitarian and not at all universalist.

But something was lacking in my prepared remarks. Listening to the other speakers, before it was my turn, I realized what was missing: humor. Humor is very effective in *establishing ethos*. But there was no humor in my prepared remarks. I didn't know what to do. With each speaker and with each bit of laughter, I felt more and more unprepared. With each speaker, I also felt more and more out of place. I was the only non-unitarian on the program! Suddenly, though, I knew what to do, thanks to a twenty year old memory.

Here's how I began. I said, "Here I am, the only trinitarian . . ." People laughed. That was a good sign. I continued: "Here I am, the only trinitarian in a room full of unitarians." People laughed some more. That was a very good sign. Then I said this: "To steal a line I heard twenty years ago, I feel like a piece of bacon at a *bar mitzvah*." People roared with laughter! My *ethos* was well on the way to being established. I would be heard that night.

Biblical characters sometimes had their own issues with *ethos*. Take Moses, for example. After growing up in Pharaoh's palace, he went out to his people. When he saw two of them fighting, he intervened. But his intervention was rejected. He had no standing with his people, no *ethos*. They didn't know his character. They weren't comfortable with him. They didn't trust him. Why should they? They didn't know Moses from a hole in the ground — not yet. In time, people would come to know Moses well. No, they wouldn't always do what he said. But by and large, they would at least hear him out.

Moses did not enter the Promised Land with the people. That probably was just as well. The generation that knew Moses best; the generation that knew his character, his power, and his humility; the generation that were most "comfortable" with Moses, to use a word that probably isn't quite right — that generation was gone. There was a new generation now, and they would be attentive to Joshua.

Moses wasn't the only one. Paul the Apostle has his *ethos*-issues, too. He had enemies, enemies who opposed him because they opposed the Gospel. Their primary strategy was to discredit Paul. Wherever Paul went, carrying with him the news — the good news about what God had done in Jesus Christ: that Jesus had come to bring Israel's story to its goal; that God was reconciling the world to himself through Jesus; that through Jesus, the great promise to Abraham was fulfilled, blessing was flowing out to all nations, to you in Ephesus, in Philippi, in Corinth, in Thessalonica; that the kingdom was coming; that Jews and Gentiles both had their place in it — wherever Paul went, carrying with him this good news, enemies reared their heads. They stirred up trouble with the public authorities. They spread rumors about Paul, a whispering campaign.

They had a list of accusations. Paul was deluded and peddling delusions. Paul was morally corrupt. ("Think of the children!") Paul was deceitful, telling half-truths at best in order to mislead people. And the list went on. Paul manipulated people, won them over with smooth words. Paul was greedy, in it for the money. And for the glory, too. He loved to call himself the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was pushy

and demanding; his very presence was a burden to everyone around him. In the end, Paul cared about no one but himself.

These accusations threatened to pull the rug out from under Paul. These accusations threatened to undermine the good results of his work in Corinth, in Philippi, and in Thessalonica. Who would listen to someone so accused? Who would listen to someone so discredited? For all the world, you would think that Paul would be dead in the water, his *ethos* evaporated, nothing left in people's mouths but a sour aftertaste: "How could we have been so blind? How could we have been such fools?" The enemies would be saying, "You're done for, Paul! Why don't you pack it in and go home?"

Well, there's another important aspect to *establishing ethos*. When I'm speaking at First Unitarian Universalist Church, to a group of people who don't know me, then I have to say some things fairly quickly, things that will put them at ease with me, things that will hint, at least, that I might be worth listening to. The situation is different, however, when I'm speaking here. You have known me, most of you, for nearly nine years. In those years, you have heard enough and seen enough — not secondhand either, but firsthand — that you are willing to hear me on Sunday mornings, that you have enough confidence in my character and in my sincerity not to close your eyes and turn me off.

That, actually, was Paul's situation with the church in Thessalonica. He had spent time with them. Not a lot of time, but enough time for them actually to know him. To know his message, sure. But also to know his character, his attitude, his behavior. To know him as a man of integrity, as a man worth hearing out.

Listen to how Paul undermines the accusations against him. Again and again, he reminds the Thessalonian Christians of what they know, of what they know about Paul firsthand. "You know," he writes. You know we did not come to you in vain. You know how we were treated in Philippi. You know we are not flatterers. "You remember," he writes. You remember how hard we worked among you. "You are witnesses," he writes, witnesses of how devout, how upright, how blameless we were. "You know," he writes. You know how we were like a father to each one of you. "You know . . . You know . . ."

What they knew was this, that Paul's character and behavior were in every way consistent with his message. Not only had he told them the good news about the kingdom, he also had shown them how to live in that kingdom. Not only had he made clear to them his love for Jesus Christ, he had also made clear his love for them. Not only had he shared the good news with them, he had also shared himself with them. They knew Paul, and that made all the difference.

Now I think I'm supposed to suggest some practical pay-off from this account of 1 Thessalonians 2. That's often the most challenging part of preaching. Some preachers suggest that it's not really our job. That we serve up the meal, but it's up to you to chew it. That said, let me wonder about some things with you.

I wonder, to take one example — I wonder how important our individual character is to the progress of the Gospel. Whether people hear and believe and are saved — I wonder what influence our individual character has on that: our kindness, honesty, and generosity; our patience, humility, and faithfulness; and our overall integrity, the match between what we profess in Jesus Christ and how we actually live. Is the Gospel granted or denied a hearing because of us? I wonder.

And I wonder how well genuine love serves the Gospel. Are people more inclined to trust the Gospel, are people more inclined to trust Jesus, when the message comes from someone who obviously loves them, when they learn of the love of Jesus for them by the way you show them love? And I wonder if this sort of love, love with an agenda — even though it's a Gospel agenda, that people hear and believe and are saved — I wonder if this sort of love, with its agenda, is manipulative. And I wonder if, somehow, that is contrary to the Gospel itself.

And I wonder how we can both show and tell the Gospel, faithfully reflecting the Gospel in what we say and in how we live. But not just reflecting it. More than that, translating the Gospel somehow into the 21st century city, where we live.

These are some of the things I wonder about. I intend to keep wondering about them. And I welcome you to join me in that.