

February 5, 2017
1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-16

For Presbyterians, a congregation does not belong to a pastor. Each congregation is the people's community. The pastor is the hired help to keep the engine running. Presbyterians do not believe that the pastor is any better or different from the folks sitting in the pews; pastors simply have a unique job to do. We are not better Christians, or pied pipers for new members, or wizards with built-in right answers for the church's problems. Most importantly, preachers or pastors do not grow anyone's faith. A sermon does not change anyone or anything. It is the Holy Spirit who gives faith. God plants seeds in people's hearts, then God nurtures the seeds and grows us to bear fruit.

Many people say they couldn't be a pastor because they think they don't have the right words. They worry that they will mispronounce one of those tricky biblical names, or stumble over a printed prayer, or maybe say something "wrong". But preaching (and worship leadership) isn't about saying the "right" words. We never say the right words. No words will ever be good enough for Jesus, nor will any of our words ever be the make-or-break connector in someone's faith. In fact, anything good that we do is done by the Spirit within us, not actually done by ourselves. Words of praise, acts of compassion, kind thoughts are all works of the Spirit. And inasmuch, we do not *earn* our Christian faith or church membership, but are **given** a place by the grace of God.

This principle shapes how we worship. We offer words of praise and joy, lament and anger, trusting that the Holy Spirit will intercede for us, taking the best of our words to God, and letting the rest pass away. We leave space for silence **and** conversation so that one person's words are not the only ones heard. We use corporate prayers with words

shared by believers in other churches and countries. The saying of these common words becomes a demonstration of Christian unity across time and space.

This debate about right and wrong words was the impetus for the Roman Catholic Church's use of Latin, and standard texts for Mass. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory made sure that no matter where they were, or what language they spoke, congregations would say the "right" words in worship. Even going so far as to assign the right people with the right words at the right time and place in worship.

You may remember from the first chapter of Corinthians that the whole reason Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth was that they had called him to settle some disputes. They wanted to know the "right" way to do things. They divided into camps over some practical issues of Christian living, and they wanted their problems solved. As children of the larger Greek culture, they relied on classical knowledge and experience to define what should have been the "right" answers. Paul wrote to them that the right answers they sought would not come from his expertise or wisdom, but from "a demonstration of the Spirit so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God."

Much to some people's chagrin, Christian faith is not based on human wisdom. We will never find the right answers within ourselves. Common sense and historical values will not bring better or more successful Christian living. Instead, faith is proven by a demonstration of the Spirit. A visible sign of the invisible grace for which we yearn. Something to show and tell. Something to see and believe.

But what? and from whom?

Jesus told the crowds in his sermon on the mount that they were the ones who would demonstrate God's presence in the world. They should flavor the earth. They were the light of the world, and it was their job to lighten the world. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."

Perhaps simply by being you – a good creation of God – you bring light to the world. Perhaps simply by living a humble, yet sacred life, you demonstrate the Spirit to the world. Perhaps by shining even the dimmest light within you, you proclaim that the power of God does not rest on human wisdom and understanding, but is known only through the Spirit.

Rosa Parks was an educated African American woman, but her intellectual abilities were not what secured her a place in history. Her demonstration on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama challenged the world to give her a seat with other working folks. She gave what she had – exhaustion – and let her light shine so that others could see God within her, and what God intended for the community.

Other civil rights leaders talked about meeting people on their own terms, whether that was out in the field picking cotton, or waiting at the bus stop, or working in kitchens. Where and how they placed their bodies was critical to the success of the movement. Especially given that a majority of their audience was illiterate and classically uneducated, it wasn't about rhetoric or persuasive arguments written printed in notable publications. It was a demonstration of the Spirit at work in our national life.

This political season is as ripe a time to share your faith. People are desperate for signs of light and goodness in the world. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven." Think as much about what

you are *already* demonstrating to the world by word and deed, as what you *would like* to demonstrate, and what you see others demonstrate.

How do you respond when you read a headline with which you disagree? How do you respond when a stranger acts in a way that contradicts what you believe? How do you respond when a friend or family member acts in a way that contradicts what you believe? “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.”

Coming to the Communion table is a demonstration of what you believe.