

## BLESSED SURRENDER

Before I was called to be a pastor I was in sales. At first, selling group insurance to larger companies: health, dental, life insurance, and later selling packaging equipment: stretch wrap, tape, bar code readers and scanners, and inventory control systems. What I loved most about this work was meeting people. From the suit and tie benefits manager in the corporate office, to the shipping manager out in the plant, to the workers who were being enrolled in a new insurance program, it was those moments of connection, regardless of our educations, compensation, or rank in the company in which we worked together to address a business need or challenge.

I know that at times sales people have gotten a bad name. You say “sales” and folks may think, “Oh yeah, I know about your type – the guy with the ever-present smile and clever lines that is adept at manipulating people into purchasing things they don’t really need.” In my book, that’s never been what sales is about. Sales is simply identifying or responding to a company’s need and presenting a solution. Sometimes the solution is a match and sometimes it isn’t, but you can’t engage in any sort of sales if you don’t believe in your product, if you don’t believe that what you are offering is really going to make a difference.

You also won’t be very good at sales if you can’t meet people where they are. When the Amish worker at a rural production plant comes through the enrollment line for the “new” health insurance program his company just purchased from you, and says, “Hey, what’s all this about having to call ahead before I go into the hospital?” (something that was a VERY new idea in the 80s when I was working for Prudential). You had better be able to begin your response with something other than, “Well, that’s just the way it works.”

You need to be able to help the person right in front of you have an understanding of why this is a good thing for them and not just the company’s bottom line. You need to be as comfortable stepping into the office of the white collar Vice President of Production as you are walking in through the shipping dock at the back of the plant to speak to the Shipping Manager. To the person in the front office you become as the person in the front office; to the person in the back of the plant you become as the person in the back of the plant. In each instance, by listening and looking for connections, you meet people where they are. It’s but a small step from “Oh, that’s a nice fish you’ve got on the wall, do you like fishing?” to “I’d like to tell you about a product that could benefit your employees and help keep your health insurance rates under control.”

As we continue our reading in Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth today we encounter Paul as the ultimate sales person in the best sense and hit upon one of Paul’s most oft-quoted phrases, that he will be “all things to all people” Among the Jews, Paul is a committed and observant Jew, To those under the law, Paul will conduct himself as one also under the law, even though he is not subject to that law. To those outside the law, he will appear and present himself as one also outside of the law, even though he is “not free from God’s law” To the weak, Paul will offer himself as one who is weak,

Now, this may at first sound like confirmation of our worst suspicions about sales people – that don't really care about anything except what they're selling and they're just chameleons who change their colors to suit the situation in which they find themselves. You don't have to be a bad example of how to approach sales to exhibit these qualities. We all know or have known folks who seem to be a composite of whoever they're hanging around with at the moment. But that's not what Paul's up to here. As Paul notes, he is attempting to take seriously the obligation" that has been laid upon him, namely, the proclamation of the gospel. And we should take note, since as Christ's disciples, we bear the same obligation. Central to Paul's approach is a fundamental principle that informs Paul's entire ministry: The gospel, the power of God, always encounters and engages people where they are, where they live, in their social matrix. Inevitably, the gospel moves them and changes them, but it always comes to them, engages them, and nourishes them from that very point, as and where they are. As one commentator puts it:

[Paul] goes to people, where they are, on their own terms. He does not require that they come to him or that they meet him on his own ground. He, a Jew, is apostle to gentiles, non-Jews, but they do not have to become Jews in order to be welcomed into the gospel. He knows that the gospel bridges ethnic boundaries and works its power in whatever context. Put in other terms, people do not have to possess authorized, pre-approved dippers before they can drink from the gospel. Paul custom-pours. Paul's is a noteworthy confidence that the gospel does not have to be protected by issuing it only in pre-approved containers.

Rather than employing some inauthentic sales ploy to get folks to "buy" his product, Paul freely chooses to identify with those who need good news. For the sake of the gospel, Paul chooses to be for others so that they might be among those who enjoy blessings.

Author Samuel Wells, in the book "Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence" that he co-authored with Marcia Owen distinguishes four models of engagement: working for, working with, being for and being with. He explains that being with is at the heart of his work with the poor. As you learn to love the stranger, he says, you "experience in your own body some of the fragility of relationships, self-esteem and general well-being that are at the heart of poverty." Being with has only one motivation, he insists. It can only be done for love. In this we imitate how God loves us. God is with us for no other reason than that God loves us for our own sake. "I have made myself a slave to all," writes Paul, "so that I might win more of them." The practice of being with leads Christians to witness quietly with touch and with words of love to those who most need our presence and the love of Christ.

This can be a challenge to those of us comfortable in our largely middle-class, white, mainline Protestant tradition. What would it mean for us to emulate Paul with integrity? I think the idea of "being with" invites us to something beyond charity. Don't get me wrong, benevolence, charity, sharing of what we have for the benefit of others is a good thing, but if that is all we do we run the risk of remaining ensconced in our privilege, of proclaiming the gospel at a distance – at a distance not only for others but for ourselves as well. It is the "being with" that has the power to transform all involved. How might we think about relinquishing our privilege so that blessing of the gospel can be more widely extended and shared? For what is the gospel's blessing but new life, acceptance, value, justice, freedom, and love.?

For Paul, the obligation to proclaim the gospel is not a cause for boasting or arrogance; neither is it a means to an end or a reward. It is a blessing to be shared. In a polarized society, how might we meet people where they are, not necessarily in agreement with their beliefs or opinions, but where they are, in their need, their insecurity, their lost-ness, their feeling devalued, marginalized, and “be with” them – in deep listening, for the sake of the gospel.

Paul, you will note, never forgets or surrenders who he is, or what’s at the heart of what he believes, but he is willing to surrender just about everything else, to bring God’s good news in blessing to others.

AMEN.