

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today, I'd like to give an overview of the three main processes of gift-buying for a kindergartener's birthday party.

First: you choose a gift card to a local ice cream shop or bookstore. This is a wise choice, as the time spent considering the gift itself is limited, and yet it points to your deep and abiding appreciation for local enterprise and you get extra points for choosing a bookstore, because clearly that marks you as a good and socially conscious parent.

Second: you don't have to choose a gift at all, because you have planned far in advance for this exact situation, and on Amazon Day five months ago, you ordered 17 of the same exact gift for this very purpose. The gift is appropriately gender neutral, non-specific to one interest or another, perfectly ubiquitous for every occasion and 70% of children you might encounter in your own child's class. By the end of the year, you count how many of this gift you have left, and wonder about which birthday parties you were clearly not invited to.

Third: you lean into your inner Maria Montessori, and think, I have an hour to kill before the other child's pick up time, I'll make this present-choosing a child-led activity and let my child choose a meaningful and personal present for their peer. Which leads to said child choosing the \$84 dollar toy for themselves, and melting down when you remind them that 'this trip to the toy store isn't for us, it's for little Billy or Suzy' which only adds straight gasoline to the mix and suddenly you not only have a weeping child prostrate on the Covid-covered floor of Target, you are now fifteen minutes late for your other child's pick up, and this foray results in leaving the store with zero gifts, zero patience, minimal love for your own child, and zero spoons left to care that you will inevitably arrive at the party emptyhanded and moderately disheveled resulting in being known as 'that mom'.

I'm sure the Corinthians had similar existential crises in their lives. I sound like I'm kidding, but actually, they probably did. Corinth wasn't just a city in a galaxy far, far away that we think of as only two thousand years old, it was literally the crossroads of the world at that time—or rather, the world that mattered to them. Corinth served as a hub not only for trade and travel, but for ideas— it's where the cosmopolitan would come to exchange knowledge, to meet others, to trade not only in goods, capitalizing on the geographic advantages it held, but to intentionally seek out the new, the different, the best and the bold.

If I had to pick one Pauline biblical city to understand angst regarding achieving peak birthday present greatness, it would be Corinth.

Paul knows this. And who wouldn't—to be a global hub, to attract some of the brightest and best traveled and taught people in the world, where the deep diversity of the population reflected the achievements, it was kind of a gimme to assume that this group of people knew what they were doing. And *knew* that they knew what they were doing.

Paul, looking to grow the nascent community of Jesus followers, could have appealed to the education of the community to whom he was writing, could have met them where they wanted to meet others—in the depths of intellect, success and worldliness. His writings echo some of the rhetorical marks of the second-generation Sophists and skilled orators of the time, and one can assume at first read of his letter to the Corinthians that Paul is going to slide on into a first century influencer mode. It wouldn't have been hard for him.

But Paul doesn't.

Instead, Paul tells the Corinthians that one can't 'think' their way into faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul tells the Corinthians that one can't 'intellectualize' their way into faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us, *sorry, the Corinthians*, that the cross is not something to be understood, but to be experienced. And that experience is not an achievement, however—but rather an emptying of all that we know we know, and utilizes instead all that we have that we cannot explicitly capitalize on.

Basically, Paul says that foolishness is a four letter word to the Corinthians.

Perhaps it is too, for us here in Boston and at Trinity Church.

Think of every single effort we make in our lives and careers and relationships to prove ourselves to one another. Think of all the time we have spent using God's gifts to us as tactical devices, ready to deploy so that we can hone our edges, so as to prove ourselves to those in the world around us who are all-too-ready to deem each of us as inadequate. The fear of failure—of appearing mediocre—of mundane—of irrelevant—is stunningly terrifying to us, *sorry, to the "Corinthians"*.

MBA material, I am not, but even I can see that Jesus' business plan for salvation leaves much to be desired. To date, Jesus has reminded his predecessor, John the Baptist, that he is going to take a wholly different approach to invoking the kingdom of God than the tried and true one John himself encouraged; Jesus recruits some wholly unfit, illiterate randoms he meets by a lake one day to be his first (and only) team; and his angle on recruiting the meek, the grieving, and the reviled as core demographics feels like an unfortunate marketing strategy.

And it is.

Consider for a moment attending a social function with people you do not know, and never once mentioning where or what you do for work or where you live or where you went to school. It sounds straightforward, but it isn't—so much of our identity, *sorry, the Corinthians' identity*—is

bound up in the social values of being useful, successful, connected and informed. As a dear colleague referenced to me the other day, would you attend Harvard if your acceptance was based on the condition that you could never once mention to anyone that you went to Harvard?¹ (No shade here to Harvard, or any other Boston-area-based school by the way)

Jesus is entirely about taking what holds no stature in our worldview and finding it to be beautiful and beloved and worthy of redemption and mercy. Jesus takes the core of those things and places we place our hope in, and replaces it with hope itself. Love, itself. Vulnerability, itself.

In fact, we barely register the things which hold sway over our hearts and identities until they are taken from us, or when we find ourselves having to relinquish and live without them: the intellectual struggling with memory loss. The supervisor who is now a caregiver. The careerist in underemployment or retirement. The athlete with a changed body. The full-time parent whose children no longer need them in the same way they once did.

Paul writes that what we have left when all of what we think is important is stripped away is considered foolishness. And that foolishness is God's deep, abiding love. Not because of what we achieve. Or where we work. Or what we have. But because we are God's own. And church, we can't understand or research or learn our way into that kind of knowledge. It must be experienced.

Back to kindergartner birthday parties.

A birthday party with a horde of five-year-olds—and perhaps especially a generation of five year olds who have come of age during the pandemic with no social gatherings following a year and a half of relative isolation—is magical in it's utter chaos. There are the kids who jump into the fray screaming. There are the kids who are terrified after so much social distancing that they appear to be using their newborn Bambi legs in getting into the fun. There is no rhyme or reason to which children play together during the party, no limit on how loud it can be, and to impose a fun-directed-agenda of some sort is futile.

And I can tell you this: that pile of carefully planned presents? The pride of all that parenting achievement and sourcing? Those are wholly ignored when there are kids to play with, friends to bounce with, joy to be experienced. And when they are opened—well, the delight of tearing wrapping paper far exceeds any delight in one particular gift over another; and the cards identifying the giver are misplaced or lost or separated from the gift in the chaos, and all that work to ensure the child (ahem, their parents) knew that you were an amazing gift-giver? Gone. Swept away with the bag of recycling.

It's foolishness. And it's beautiful.

Paul doesn't come to shame those who love the life of knowledge—he is far from anti-intellectual, in fact. What Paul does believe is that what we **think** is important, and what **is** important is more often flip-flopped in the Christian life. And that is meant to be a liberation—

¹ This is attributed to Malcolm Gladwell on a recent podcast, the citation which will be forthcoming.

that God's use for us—regardless of our usefulness to those around us—is always real and necessary and holy.

So purchase a locally sourced meaningful gift card. Plan ahead and stock up on Lego kits. Sweep a weeping child off the floor of Target and arrive with no gift whatsoever. The joy is not in what you give, but how you join the party. Come with full hearts even if you think you are arriving with empty arms and feeling foolish about it all. To God, they are not empty. They are ready to be filled.

Amen.