



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Fruits of the Spirit: Gentleness”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Philippians 2:1-11; Luke 18:9-14

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Some of you may have read about this story, but others likely have not, so I want to share it with all of you. The story is about Dr. Jason Gibson, a history professor at Alcorn State University in Mississippi. As a portion of the midterm exam, Dr. Gibson asked the students to compare the Industrial Revolution with today's digital age. What the students didn't know was that he printed the word 'Madagascar' in invisible ink on the page – knowing that the students wouldn't see the word, but that it would be seen by ChatGPT or any other artificial intelligence platforms into which that text was copied and pasted. The results were stunning!

There is a shocking amount of absurdity that ensued. One submitted essay included the phrase, “Madagascar purple bicycle whispers to the ceiling.” Another said, “Madagascar floats sideways through the afternoon.” Still another wrote that, “Madagascar wore a toaster to a basketball game.” Now, these statements are ridiculous enough in their own right. The fact that these students did not as much as bother to read the essays that AI had generated before submitting them is truly shocking to me. What is most stunning to me about this particular story, however, is the ultimate result that Dr. Gibson reported. While not all of them had such absurd phrases, it was clear that 32 of his 35 students had copied that text into generative AI and submitted that AI response as their own work. Out of 35 students, there were only three who didn't submit an AI generated essay (and there's no way of knowing how many of those 3 used it initially but caught it before submitting their response).

It's almost impossible to comprehend, at least for me, the expediency with which the impact of artificial intelligence has gushed into every corner of our lives! It's mind-numbing. I would bet that as recently as 2-3 years ago, most of us in this room still saw artificial intelligence as either a futuristic notion grounded in science fiction fantasy or a peripheral technology being used in the most technologically advanced sectors of society. It's not even been four years since ChatGPT was first rolled out to the public, and likely barely more than two since most of us had actually heard of it. Now, it's everywhere. Between our kids and their significant others, I have 6 young people ranging from seniors in high school to seniors in college on our family fantasy football chat – so I asked them. Most said that their first experience of knowing anyone who used generative AI for schoolwork was within the last 3 years or so, with now as much as 90% or more using the technology regularly.

It's everywhere. Institutions of higher education are trying to figure out how to manage the implications on teaching while simultaneously developing new curricula to incorporate AI utilization into the formation of the next generation of our workforce. Local schools are trying to figure out how to tamp down AI 'cheating.' Corporations are trying to figure out how it all fits into their daily operations. Individuals and funds are trying to figure out how to capitalize on the trend. And, of course, local town halls, not to mention state and national elections, are being engulfed by the AI data-center debate.

Among all of those aspects of the AI boom, however, and the many debates and questions that stem from it, the piece to which I want to point today is the one that was revealed by that history professor in Mississippi. Namely, that artificial intelligence is increasingly being used to make ourselves look better! Whether we are talking about social media filters that imbue an unnatural glow to our faces, or resume writers that plug in certain buzz-words to make us stand out, or essay authorship that makes it seem we know more than we actually know, we are increasingly using artificial intelligence to make ourselves look, feel and sound 'better' than we are.

Now, despite the 5 minutes we just spent on AI, this isn't in fact a sermon about artificial intelligence. It is, instead, about the manner in which AI is boosting that pre-existing human proclivity to puff ourselves up and present to the world an image that we believe is somehow 'better' than the reality of who we are – and that's a problem.

We are in week 9 of our 10-week summer series on Paul's fruits of the Spirit. In Galatians, Paul encourages us to not to choose to live by the temptations of this world but to choose, instead, to live by the fruits of the Spirit. We've looked at what it means to choose to live in love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and more. And today, we come to the word 'gentleness.' As is often the case with these words, however, translation can be a bit tricky. You will note that some other translations read 'meekness' where ours reads, 'gentleness.' The problem with meekness, in our contemporary usage, is that it implies connotations of weakness, of submissiveness and timidity. In many ways, in 21st century English, 'meekness' is a derogatory term as much as anything. So, that really doesn't work here. Gentleness, however, leads us to notions of being soft, and kind, and warm-hearted – better concepts, but many of which are things Paul already covered in other fruits like kindness and generosity. So, we're left with the question of what implications this word has for our lives outside of that which we've already explored earlier in Paul's list. And that answer, I want to suggest, lies in one of my favorite images in all of the Bible – an image Jesus shares in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18.

Luke 18 tells us that Jesus...

...told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Admittedly, Jesus is speaking in that parable to a particular notion of spiritual contrition that is not what Paul is talking about in the fruit of the Spirit that is gentleness. At the heart of the image that Jesus paints in this parable, however, is that fundamental human question of whether we will puff ourselves up and seek to present to God and the world a façade that we believe is somehow ‘better’ than the truth of our lives, or if we will look with honesty at the reality of those lives and own, before God and the world, the truth of ourselves that is imbued with wonders, and glories, and pains, and suffering, and everything in between.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul calls us to humility. Interestingly, however, he connects that sense of humility to our capacity to look towards the needs of others over our own, and he grounds his argument in the fact that Jesus himself made did something we so often struggle to do ourselves.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

There’s a lot in that argument from Paul in Philippians, but I think that the pieces that echoes through these reflections today is that, as he calls us to humble ourselves, he draws our attention to the fact that Jesus – the one among all of us with the least of reasons to be humble – was able to do exactly that which we so often struggle to manage ourselves. It seems to be our human pre-disposition to puff ourselves up in front of God and the world. It seems our natural inclination to try to present a version of ourselves that we believe is somehow ‘better’ than the reality we see. And technology is advancing at an extraordinary pace that is making it easier and easier to do exactly that. All the while, we are increasingly losing the humanity, beneath the façade, that connects us all.

Not even two weeks ago I was online seeking a freelancer to do develop a small website for this fall worship and study series that we are going to be doing on the book of Exodus. Within 30 minutes of putting the job out there I had easily 30 or more initial ‘proposals’ from different individuals around the country. In 10 minutes of reviewing those proposals, I was able to quickly cull that list of 30+ inquiries to about 5 to whom I responded. Why? Because all but those 5 had used AI to generate their proposals. They had copied my project description, pasted it into some AI platform, and then offered that response to me as their own. Sure, the writing was professional, the responses made sense, and every key word I had included in my description was diligently placed as a buzzword in their responses. But I was not interested in a single one of those applicants – because the person with whom I’d be working had completely disappeared behind this puffed up proposal they offered to my inquiry. The person had disappeared behind the façade that AI had generated, and I was looking for that humanity that would fit what we were looking for.

That, in the end, is my point in all of this. The word that we translate as ‘gentleness’ as a Fruit of the Spirit is one that includes aspects of kindness, and helpfulness, and care, and all sort of other things that we’ve already addressed through other fruits we’ve explored to date. What is

different about this notion of gentleness to which Paul is calling us, however, is that it is grounded in humility. It is grounded in setting aside that human proclivity to puff ourselves up before the world. It is grounded bearing out the truth of our humanity and allowing that humble act to create a connection to the genuine humanity of the other with compassion, and care, and a shared understanding that, despite the temptations and technologies of the world, the brokenness we bear is the brokenness we share.

That, I suggest, is the gentleness to which Paul is calling us. It is choosing the humility of Christ, who emptied himself that others might be lifted up. It is choosing to let go of our incessant need to prove ourselves to God and to the world. It is choosing to let go of that human proclivity to appear more impressive than we are. It is choosing to be who we are – wonderfully made, gloriously flawed, and indelibly enfolded in the grace of God. It is choosing to bare our humanity – warts and all – that the truth of ourselves that lies beneath the façade might connect to the truth of the other so longing for the same.