

Thorns, Warts and All

A sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 & Mark 6:1-13 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 July 2018

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Pretending to be better than we are alienates us from God and one another. Being open and real about our weaknesses and failures open us to God and one another.

Sermon

One of the things that makes me proud of this church is that people often say they feel safe to be themselves here. Of course the reason that that draws comment is that it is something that has often not been true of churches. Many of us remember being in churches where you had to be very very careful about what other church people found out about you. You had to keep much of the truth about yourself hidden. But we seem to have succeeded in fostering a different culture here.

When Acacia shared a bit of her story as we baptised her a couple of months ago, she said that growing up in this church for her whole 20 years, she had always felt that it was okay to be whoever she was here, that she didn't have to pretend. And on the same night, as we baptised Uncle Dennis, he felt comfortable to come out of the water after the third dunk saying, not "Hallelujah, Jesus is Lord" as the liturgical texts prescribed, but "That'll bloody do!" It wasn't just funny. It was very Dennis, very real.

By contrast, Danielle had the experience somewhere else of joining a church just after having a baby die at birth and being asked by the church leadership not to tell the rest of the congregation what she was dealing with. Somehow grief and brokenness had no place in the life of that church. She was expected to pretend, to keep up appearances.

We Christians have an unfortunate reputation for being extremely judgemental. We are seen as very very unaccepting of people's weaknesses and failures and uncertainties. We are seen as intolerant of one another's moral and temperamental rough edges. Unfortunately we have that reputation because so often it has been true. And, fearing one another's judgement, we have put a lot of energy into hiding our rough edges and pretending to be more successful and more spiritual and more polished and virtuous and pious than we really are.

It seems as though we are often driven by a belief that since we are being made whole and perfect in Christ, we should all have pretty much arrived by now. We should already be pretty close to perfect, and that to allow others to see otherwise would be to be seen as out of step, behind the pack, and total failures. And of course, if I think you can only accept me and value me if I appear to be living up to the expected standards, then my need for love and acceptance will drive me to do whatever I can to convince you that I am making the grade. Whether that is the reality underneath or not.

The particular set of standards that we are expected to live up to will vary from church to church. Churches like ours are not immune to this; it just takes a different shape. In some churches, the most important things are traditional family values, regular bible study, doctrinal confidence, and a blissfully spiritual happiness. None of those things are necessarily wrong, but they can become a prison if they are demanded as our ticket to acceptance. In other churches, it's social activism, support of minorities, pluralistic spirituality, and ecological

sustainability. Again, all good things, but again, if they are imposed on us as the conditions of our acceptance of one another, they become tools of oppression rather than pathways to freedom.

Underneath those beliefs about what is acceptable to one another, there may often be another belief about what is acceptable to God. We may be imagining God as similarly judgemental and intolerant and demanding. But I think that is not always the main factor. We might be able to fool one another, but I suspect that few of us imagine that we are going to be able to fool God. So I reckon that mostly we are driven to try to live up to one another's expectations because we are genuinely needy of love and acceptance and a sense of closeness to one another. So why are we so often so impossibly demanding of one another that we end up having to hide behind the masks that we think are required?

Tonight we heard how Jesus himself came under pressure to toe the party line and conform to people's expectations in his home town. The version we heard tonight from Mark's gospel focussed on the way they dismissed him as just the local handyman trying to big note himself, but we know from other accounts that what first got up their noses was the content of his message.

His message of a kingdom that didn't favour Israel over everybody else broke with the prevailing orthodoxies, and that was what prompted the local campaign to bring him back down a peg or two and pull him back into line. Their message was clear: he could be accepted if his preaching reinforced their view of themselves and the world. That's not much different from most of our churches.

The Apostle Paul addressed these things in the extract we heard tonight from one of his letters to the Corinthians Christians. Paul is caught up in a controversy where some people in Corinth who oppose him are trying to dismiss him as unworthy and untrustworthy, and are trying to promote themselves as the true leaders of the church community. They have been spruiking their credentials as super spiritual people who are constantly having God given visions and receiving God given messages. And we heard Paul hinting that he could probably hold his own in a competition of ecstatic spiritual experiences, but then saying that that's not the point.

They were also dismissing him as weak and feeble and thus too much of a failure to be taken seriously as God's anointed leader. Can you hear how similar that is to so many of our churches even today? He's not up to standard. He's not manifesting the blessings of God and the victorious life of those who are truly anointed by the Holy Spirit.

This is the point where the Apostle does enter the argument and directly challenges the assumptions. He argues that our weaknesses, far from being something we should conceal for the sake of the gospel, are actually things we can and should be quite open about because it is precisely at our weakest points that the power of God's love and mercy are most obviously at work. Paul goes as far as to say that he will boast in his weaknesses so that the power of Christ might be known in him.

He goes on to tell this cryptic story of his attempts to overcome one of his weaknesses. He doesn't tell us what it is, he just refers to it as "a thorn in the flesh". People have speculated ever since. Some think it was a degenerative eye disease that left him almost blind. Others

think the “in the flesh” description suggests something like perhaps he was homosexual and unable to accept himself as such because of the conservative value system of his day. And when you read the passages with that possibility in mind, it certainly seems to be a good fit. Others have all sort of theories, but Paul didn’t tell us and we’ll never know.

But whatever it was, the point of his story is that he repeatedly appealed to God to remove it, but that God repeatedly said no and said “My grace is sufficient for you,” or in other words, you are better off relying on my grace than being so strong that you don’t even seem to need my grace.

Do you hear what he is saying to us here? When we think we have to look perfect and victorious in order to give glory to God, we are actually shutting God out of the picture. When we only let our strengths and our successes be seen, we are actually glorifying ourselves because the parts of our lives that we are showing, or sometimes the masks that we are showing, are precisely the places where we can get along without God and just rely on our own abilities. The broken and fragile parts of our lives where we can do nothing but rely on God are precisely the parts where God’s love and mercy and help might be seen at work and glorified.

As the prophet Leonard Cohen said, “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

But this is not just about some sort of evangelistic need to show off what God can do. There is something else going on here too, something that brings us back to our needs for the love and acceptance of one another. It is actually our broken fragile parts that enable us to truly and deeply connect with one another too.

You see, when I see someone who is always stronger than me and more prayerful than me and more committed and engaged and effective than me, I might admire them and be inspired by them, but I almost never see them as someone I could relate to and draw close to and develop any real intimacy with. They are out of my league, inaccessible and remote.

The people who I feel close to and understood by and truly connected with are the people whose struggles I can see and relate to. They are the people to whom I can show the truth about myself because we share similar truths to one another.

[Nadia Bolz-Weber describes it](#) using that metaphor of rough edges. She says that instead of trying to sand and polish off our rough edges, it is actually the rough edges that enable us to connect and hold onto one another. Two polished stones easily slide past one another and no real connection is made, but two rough stones pushed together will catch onto one another and maintain a grip. It’s our broken bits and our rough edges that create the possibility of real intimacy, or real connection, or real experiences of mutual grace and love.

She also suggests that this is how we truly connect with God too, and not just one another. She’s right I think, because that is part of what the Apostle is saying about relying on the strength and grace of God. The more polished we are, the less need of God we feel and less opportunity we give God to connect with us. It is the broken, jagged and hurting parts of us that will welcome God’s touch and give God something to get a grip on.

So please, let's have the courage to continue to live this. Yes, we strive for growth in wholeness and love and integrity, but that growth can only be true and healthy growth if it takes root in the fertile soil of honesty and reality. So if you've walked in here this evening feeling that you'd better keep your guard up because you're too uncertain or selfish or faithless or stumbling or just downright shitty to ever be accepted by church people and loved as you are, then please know that you are safe here, and you can be real, because that person sitting along side you or just across from you is often downright shitty too. And this bloke sounding like such a know-it-all up here in the pulpit is a veteran of more crazy failures than are easily remembered.

It's okay. In all our shared shittyiness and doubts and brokenness, we can meet one other and love one another and share the experience of God's love and grace together. You can be real about who you are here. I wish I could promise that we will always accept you beautifully and never say anything to hurt you or judge you, but I can't, because that's part of our shittyiness. Sometimes we say stupid, thoughtless, ignorant things. And there again is a jagged edge where we will catch each other, perhaps painfully, and where we can allow God in to connect with us both and draw us a little further into the healing and reconciliation that is what this little bit of God's new culture is all about.

I can't promise you that it will always be lovely, because it won't. I've seen myself stuff up too often, and I've seen most of these people here stuff up too often. But what I can promise you is that there is something real here, and that God is involved, and that together our reality is being drawn into the love and life of God, and our many and varied thorns in the flesh, though far from being taken away, are enabling us to connect and to know ourselves beloved and accepted and deeply deeply cherished by the God who, in Jesus, has shared in our brokenness and is leading us on towards a shared wholeness.