

⁶ Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses.

¹⁷ As iron sharpens iron,
so one person sharpens another.

-- Proverbs 27:6, 17

Since finding out earlier this year that I'll be heading down to Pasadena for more school, I've wondered how my sermons sound in these final few days. Although I imagine it sounds much the same, I find that I watch what I say more closely as though every word is one less word I'll get to say to you. It's been a strange time for me as a pastor. Church ministry as I understand it is always a matter of taking the long view on everything, because it takes a lifetime for character to develop. I suppose that there are other models of ministry—ones that won't require as much of an investment of care—but even in seminary they struck me as cheap shortcuts to putting bums in the pews. Yet even though I'm probably not the kind of person who favours quick fixes (if such things even exist) every day that passes is one less day to do my thing, make my mark, and equip you with strength and resources to follow God with your whole life.

It's this feeling that brings me full circle to the first temptation I had when I started preaching: that of trying to say everything I want to say in one half-hour or less. I remember one comment a member of my old church made was that listening to my sermons was like being treated to a "feast". I took pride in that until I realized that sometimes, too much feasting leads to indigestion.

So if anything, over the last few years my perspective on preaching has changed. I used to think sermons were opportunities to give you a smorgasbord of how smart Ed is. Now, I see it as a privilege to bring you the Word of God. And as I was shaped and molded by the community around me, three or five good points have turned into just one. I take to heart what one seminary professor told us all: “if you can’t say your sermon in one sentence, it probably isn’t worth saying.”

I’m telling you all this not because there’s going to be a quiz on this later on, but that I thought you should know that as time runs shorter and the temptation to say a lot more than I need to reaches flood levels, what I speak today I speak not out of exhaustion, but out of a desire to be pithy. It may be too simple a message for you, but it’s one that seems awfully pertinent as we soon part ways. So, then, what is this one major point distilled from a thousand little ones? It’s that in God’s economy, weakness, not strength, is the one of the best gifts we bring to the Community of God.

This runs counter to what we are trained to believe. The world at large tells us that we won’t get into certain schools unless we’re smart enough, won’t get certain spouses unless we’re compatible enough, won’t get certain jobs unless we’re talented enough, and won’t get certain retirement packages unless we’re diligent enough. Now that I say it, I think most of you can easily discern the difference between worldliness and Godliness, but what happens when this sort of thinking starts to dominate our life together as the people of God? The danger of thinking that only our best is allowed within the boundaries of a community is that we look down on the parts of ourselves and

our churches that aren't so presentable. When we do that, we cease living authentically to who we are—and who we are, in every condition, is the beloved children of God.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't bring our best into the service of the Church and the Kingdom of God. If anything, we sometimes toss off Kingdom work as something that's secondary compared to "real living". Yet I'd hope by now that you've heard me say enough times that "real living" *is* Kingdom work. No, we *ought* to bring every gift we have and lay them at Jesus' feet for him to use as he will. That's not a bad paradigm at all. Yet when I look back at the road we have walked together, my expectations of what has helped the most are turned upside-down.

I used to think that the local church should be something like an all-star team. You know, where the best of the best get together and redefine once and for all what a church should look like. As silly as it sounds, it's not so hard to imagine. I'll even bet that your thoughts sometimes drift towards what *could* be. What if there were more Godly, good-looking single guys? That would be nice. While we're at it, what if more people stuffed cheques into the little brown box? That'd be great too. Or what if we had a full-on ten-piece worship band complete with backup singers who can do angelic harmony? Sign me up! What about a group dedicated to lay counseling and care? An expanded library? Opportunities for both local and international short term missions trips? Community soup kitchen? Or, best of all, what if we had a preacher who didn't read his sermons and instead, actually walked around while speaking eloquently off the cuff (with tons of illustrations and ending on time)?

Or if imagining physical improvements isn't your thing, what about spiritual ones? What if our church deliberately began to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the growth of the people? What if those of us who can speak in tongues spoke when those who have the gift of interpretation were present? What if we had healers and prophets and, best of all, a bunch of lovers to build up this little body of ours? Well, we'd have a *church*, that's what. We'd have an empowered people exercising their specific gifts for the good of all—and that's not a bad thing at all.

In fact, none of what I've just mentioned are bad things. All of the good things God gives us are for the good of God's people.¹ They're positive gifts in the sense that they buff up a congregation. Things like money, teaching, non-anxious presence, wise counsel, time and so-called "simple" acceptance are things we can give each other. Yet for as much good as these positive gifts can do, in my time here I've found that it's often our weaknesses that have been the most effective in growing us as God's people. While our strengths are fun to dwell on, sometimes what works just as much and just as well are our weaknesses. Iron sharpens iron because of conflict between the two surfaces. A whetstone sharpens a knife because its grit grinds out a new edge. Sometimes, what grows us the most isn't the strength of another, but learning to deal with someone else's rough edges and weaknesses.

This isn't something that we naturally gravitate towards. There's a reason why churches tend to advertise themselves based on their positives. Most church websites

¹ 1 Cor 14:5

sound a lot the same as they tap buzzwords and flashy memes so that they all sound like this: *“we’re a multicultural multi-generational family-oriented community of Christ-seekers who engage in Spirit-led contemporary worship and the dynamic preaching of Pastor X. We also love to break bread together, both at communion (where we’re cool enough to serve real wine) and in small home support care accountability groups who study the Word of God and pray for each other.”*

By contrast, the reality of every church community never seems to make it onto the website: *“we’re a bit rag-tag, but not in the cool way that college students are. If we’re lucky, we argue about what kinds of songs we sing—most of the time, we just go passive-aggressive and leave leaders off the schedule when we don’t like them or their song selection. We have a lot of shy and awkward people who can’t really carry on a decent conversation, and along with them we have one or two sleazy guys who make it their business to hit on every girl in the congregation. And the pastor isn’t a very good preacher—we’re happy if he can keep his rambling under fifty minutes so that we can get out and avoid lunch lineups.”*

No one in their right minds boasts of their weaknesses—that’s not smart marketing. Yet God doesn’t just carpet bomb us with gifts and expect us to be perfect when we use them. He also gives us opportunities to develop Christlikeness as we share our weaknesses in the long, slow walk that forges real community and real friendship.

Think of it this way: how many times have you felt closer to someone after hearing them share something that’s normally considered private and personal?

Vulnerability is a gift to a community because it makes us stop and listen to the heart of a person instead of assuming everything is okay. Or else, how many times have you had to clench your teeth as the person you can't get along with comes your way after the announcements? Awkwardness and halting conversation is uncomfortable from one perspective, but it can also serve as an occasion to develop patience. The negative gifts that most people will judge a church community for can be the ones that grow us the most—if we *let* them. Social awkwardness, depression, anxiety, poverty, irritability, emotional distance and even poor personal hygiene are opportunities to have our own rough edges sanded down and smoothed out.

We don't think this way, though. No one ever looks to belong to a church community where they have their own characters refined by difficult relationships. It sounds like spiritual masochism! Sometimes, all difficult people mean for us is more aggravation along with the increased temptation to leave a church while the leaving's still good. But if we stick with it—if we stick with each other—we may well learn far more in struggling with each others' foibles and outright sin than we would if we were practically perfect in every way.

I know this because when I think about how I have tried to be your pastor, quite often the stuff that's benefited you the most hasn't necessarily been what I consider a product of my strengths or my giftedness. This is contrary to what I thought pastoral ministry would be like when I first came out of seminary. I was sure then that the only ways in which God would and indeed, *should* use me were in my areas of strength. Yet for as much as I've written and preached and done the things I think I can do well, I also

see that the way I've grown closer with you (and you with me) hasn't been when I'm rehearsed and scripted and, well, textbook perfect. Many times my stubbornness, my temper, my grief, and my self-centeredness have been as instructive as all the things I intentionally brought in as assets. As much as my positive gifts have sometimes been helpful, the unintended gift of my weakness has required you to stretch and accommodate and love me for real.

That's what married couples tell us all the time. After you get over how beautiful she looks in that new dress and how patient he can be when you're in a snit, love happens when you finally accept the other person as they are and enter into the mystery of sinful sainthood.² For this is what we are: simultaneously justified with the living God and still in need of salvation every day for the rest of our lives.

The reason why weakness can be as much a teacher as strength is because when we humble ourselves and admit our weaknesses, Jesus is revealed in our midst. You and I are joined together by our mutual dependence on Jesus, and when this dependence shows, he does too. More than that, the power of Christ is somehow exercised through those who admit their brokenness, let their masks fall, and live fully as they really are and not just as wishful projections. This is what Paul means when he proclaims—astoundingly—that “God’s power is made perfect in weakness”.³ Yes, you heard that right. God’s *power* is made *perfect* not through the exercise of gifts and talents, but through our weakness and foolishness and lack.

² Proverbs 10:12, 17:9; 1 Peter 4:8

³ 2 Cor 12:9

I think I always knew the truth of this, but I never really apprehended it until I heard it for myself—first for my double vision and then for all the flaws I’ve brought with me into ministry. You’ve been good enough to forgive me for the many times I’ve miscalculated and mistimed some things. You’ve struggled for new ways to see me, your pastor, when I’ve overstated and lashed out. But I daresay had I done everything right the first time, none of us would have grown as much as we have. You have been my iron, and I have been yours.

I’m not leaving this church with the sense that you’ve become authentic, forbearing, magnificent people because of my hard work and giftedness. Instead, I’m leaving you knowing that I gave you what I was supposed to give you—my whole self, beauty marks and warts and all. As iron sharpens iron—as my character has been formed by your character—so have conflict and difficulty and forgiveness all been a part of our symbiosis as shepherd and sheep. Now, you will carry on with a new shepherd, one with strengths and weaknesses that aren’t like mine. You’re going to have to learn to accommodate them in different ways than you accommodated me, but the promise of doing so is that you will be exercising the supreme gift of God: love. Dear ones, love each other deeply, for love covers a lot of sins.

1.) How have you influenced this community?