



All Are Ministers

TEXT
2 Corinthians 4:7–18

February 14, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

Have you ever known someone that you admired from afar — or maybe someone you had heard a lot about — only to discover that instead of being the image in your head, it turned out they were ... just a person?

I remember in seminary there was someone I admired like that. Let's say her name was Sarah. Sarah was pretty popular, seemed like she knew a lot in class, was really funny, was great at Ultimate Frisbee, and was one of those people you just wished you got to hang around more. And then, during my second year of seminary, I got to know Sarah better. We hung out on occasion, and I discovered that while all of those other things were still true, there were some other things that were true about Sarah. I began to see that she wasn't a perfect person. I discovered she had a really negative streak in her. She could be a little "judgy." I discovered she struggled with depression and drinking.

And then I had another thought: One day Sarah was going to be somebody's pastor.

That hit me hard because all of a sudden I was looking around at everyone at seminary

thinking, "One day he'll be someone's pastor ... and her ... and even her. And, O Lord, help us all, even HIM."

I could have stood to look in the mirror at that point. But I was too busy seeing the splinters in other people's eyes.

When Paul writes to the Corinthians, I think they were having a similar moment. They knew Paul — his talents and his faults. They would have known about his problems — not just personally, but also pastorally, professionally. The guy did a lot of jail time. And at some point, they began to ask, "If you are a servant of God, then why isn't God protecting you? Why aren't you successful all the time?"

I want to spend a little time talking about how Paul handled that question. But I then want to move on to what Paul's answer should mean for us.

What is at issue as Paul writes is how Paul can be beset by the challenges and suffering he has endured and yet claim to be a messenger of Christ. Basically he is refuting the idea that his trials demonstrate some kind of illegitimacy or godly judgment. Rather, Paul argues the trials indicate he speaks from faith. How else could he speak given his sufferings?

Paul's goal in these verses is to emphasize "that the acknowledged weakness, vulnerability, and suffering which characterize [religious leaders] are an integral part of the ministry of the gospel."¹ Such weakness and vulnerability are presented as a presentation of the passion and death of Christ.

Some people do not give in to adversity. They power through it with a stiff upper lip. But that is not how Paul ascribes his endurance. For Paul, the source of his strength is in the grace of God. God's power is made perfect in his weakness.

As one theologian puts it, for Paul, "life has surrounded us with infirmity and Christ has surrounded us with glory, that we might remember that the infirmity is ours and the glory is Christ's."²

Paul's imagery of the earthen vessel is made to emphasize that whatever good he creates is not because of him, but because of the glory of God at work. Paul, the fragile earthen vessel, is afflicted but not crushed, struck down but not destroyed. It is Paul striving for the image of Christ — his suffering is for the sake of others.

It is a beautiful image: What would it look like to be a com-

munity of people who are willing to suffer for the sake of each other — willing to suffer for the sake of *any* other?

So what does this have to do with us?

I think Paul cautions against taking too much stock in the dings and scratches of life. We are, after all, earthen vessels, and we are bound to take some damage along the way. We would do well to remember that our container, as it were, is not the most valuable thing about us. Rather, it is what we can do for each other. It's the way we can comfort someone. It is the way we can be generous beyond reason. It is the way we can forgive.

It is, in some ways, unfortunate that we often think of “pastor” or “minister” primarily as a profession — because it assumes someone who is a pastor or minister is “by profession” more qualified to be gracious, forgiving, generous, or tend to the needs of others.

One thing you learn when you delve into church life a little bit — and this is a bit of a secret — is that pastors have as many dings and difficulties as anyone else.

I've worked in churches for about 15 years now. And if there is one thing those years have taught me it is that there are people who are active in the life of the church — and people who have nothing to do with church — who are better pastors than I am or will ever be.

Let me tell you about Josh. When I was a high school director for a church near Seattle,

Josh was an elementary school teacher who volunteered in both Young Life and the youth group at church. He loved it, and you could tell he loved it. He worked incredibly hard to make it clear how much students mattered to him: He tried to get to games and musicals that students were a part of; he sent caring notes to students; he was often ahead of students when it came to technology and social media — which is no small feat with middle school and high school students.

He also admitted to me that sometimes when he left youth group or a Young Life event, he was exhausted. He admitted that he gets stressed out sometimes because he wants so badly for things to go well and fears not connecting with the one student who might really have needed him to. So when I asked him why he does it if it can stress him out like that, he replied, “Because it matters.”

And let me tell you about Matt. When I served at Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church in California, Matt was in attendance at Youth Sunday one year. After the service, he emailed me saying that the students inspired him to want to volunteer with high school. We chatted about what that would entail, and he started showing up at youth group to help out.

Matt was kind of an introvert. He wasn't the guy to go jumping right into a game, and he wasn't the guy who loved being up front. But one day I was texting a student who I knew was going through some of

life's challenges and suggested we meet for lunch on Saturday. His reply totally floored me. He said he couldn't have lunch because he was already having lunch with Matt that day. Matt had figured out that the student needed to talk about some things and decided he wanted to care for the student. That was all it took for Matt to think, “Why not me?”

I think we all know how well we can disqualify ourselves. When we say, “Why not me?” we too quickly answer our own question: “I'm not good enough; I'm not holy enough; I have too many doubts.” We get so stuck looking at the earthen jar and think we can't possibly be good enough.

Paul's words remind us that ... well actually, that you're right. We aren't good enough. None of us, on our own, is qualified. And we are in good company because, at every turn in the Bible, we find people saying to God they aren't good enough. Moses wasn't a great speaker. I'm not convinced Noah was experienced in building boats. Jeremiah thought he was too young. The disciples were a bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, doubters and zealots — and in any event, the only thing they often seemed good at was missing the point. Paul himself was a Pharisee, a persecutor of those who followed Christ.

But it isn't about *our* qualifications. It never was, because it isn't about the container. It is about *God's* qualifications.

Christ demonstrated that a lot. How often did Christ

encounter people, people who were fragile earthen containers themselves, and told them they are beautiful, they are precious, they are healed, they are loved, they are forgiven — and not because they were more deserving than the next person, but because of how much God loved. Jesus never said anything about being forgiven because of who they are; they were forgiven because of who God is.

In that way, we are all just as qualified, just as deserving as anyone else inside or outside this room. We print on the back of the bulletin each week that the ministers are all the members of the congregation. We really believe that. And we want you to believe that too. The question is: Do you really believe that?

Do you believe that in your weakness, maybe even because of your weakness, God's glory can be made complete?

In a little while, we are going to take communion together. One of the things I love about communion in our tradition is that everyone is welcome.

It is a reminder that there is a voice speaking truth in our ears, telling us that we too can love and be loved. We, too, can forgive and be forgiven. We, too, can give and receive grace — any of us, all of us.

And we can do those things not because we stand on our own, but because God stands with us as we live this life — as we receive all the turns, twists and unexpected journeys. Those will include their fair share of cracks, challenges and setbacks.

But those experiences allow us, in our imperfection and weakness, to point to God's glory.

It points to the fact that someday Sarah did end up being someone's minister.

But you know what? So did I — not because of her qualifications, or mine, but because of God's qualifications.

And my hope, the hope of every professional pastor, is that I don't stand here alone, but with each of you — and that with all of our dings and weaknesses, we would minister to each other, looking to each other and saying, "Why not me? Why not us?"

Pray with me.

¹Furnish, Victor Paul. *The Anchor Bible: II Corinthians*, p. 287

²Barclay, William. *Daily Study Bible: The Letters to the Corinthians (Revised Edition)*

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.