

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

¹Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Luke 9:46-48

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸ and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'

It's not about me, or is it?

I have a confession to make to you. I need to make this confession for two reasons; first and foremost I make this confession because it gets your attention. One thing I've learned from giving sermons is that sharing a little dirt about yourself is a sure way to get the attention of the folks in the pews; I was given this advice by your lay leader six years ago, and you should commend her for looking out for the interests of the congregation. There's nothing that captivates an audience more than the prospect of hearing some good dirt about their pastor. A confession is a clear prompt; it gets folks to sit up in the pews in anticipation of learning something really juicy about the pastor.

The second reason is because the dirt I'm about to share maybe something you can relate to, and so it can help you in your walk with Christ.

My confession: I am a very competitive individual. You may think that's a good thing, and it may be in the context of athletics. You want a professional athlete to be competitive, especially if that athlete plays for a professional team from New York City. Your jaw would drop if you heard C.C. Sabathia say in an interview after losing a game, "Well, I just felt that the batter was lacking confidence and I thought a grand slam might bolster his self-image." No! That's not the way competitive athletes behave! You play to win, to make your mark, to stand out from the ordinary, to be recognized for excellence!

And that is how I recognize that I'm competitive; If I do something and I am not recognized, I sulk. I get upset. I lose sleep. I went to a district clergy meeting last month in the Bronx – all the pastors for all the churches in Manhattan and Staten Island and the Bronx and Westchester were there, and we were given a booklet, and in that booklet the names of all the churches in the district that had paid 100% of their apportionments for 2015 were listed (for those of you who don't know what apportionments are, it's like a voluntary contribution that you make to the United Methodist Church that helps them pay for all the administrative staff and other ministries), and on that list I noticed that Bethel United Methodist Church of Staten Island...*was missing!* I thought, "There must be some mistake." I had no documents on

hand to prove that we had paid all our apportionments, but I was 99.99% sure that we HAD. We had done it for the first four years I was at the church, and I was pretty damn sure that we had paid them in 2015 as well. BUT BETHEL WAS NOT ON THE LIST. WE WERE **NOT** RECOGNIZED EVEN THOUGH WE HAD DONE A GREAT JOB, AND I WAS INDIGNANT! When the Superintendant asked all the clergy of all the churches who had paid 100% of their 2015 apportionments to stand up and be recognized, I remained seated, and I don't know if it showed, but I was sulking. As soon as I got back from the meeting, I searched my terribly disorganized records for some verification that we had paid the apportionments, couldn't find it but was so irate that I emailed the district secretary anyway...and I had to revise that email message three or four times before I sent it (because I have learned to hold my tongue, or in this case my fingers, when my anger get the better of me). Later on I found the document that actually showed that we HAD paid 100% of our annual apportionments, and I did get confirmation from QuiShaun, the district secretary who apologized for the oversight and I thought, "Yeah! I showed him. Bethel aint no deadbeat church! We do our job! How dare they not recognize that?!!"

But I also recognized how worked up I was getting over something that was really minor, how much time and energy I was spending on this matter, and that little voice in the back of my head that I like to call the Holy Spirit had asked me, "Matt, why are you holding on to this? What's your endgame? Is it because you want recognition for being a pastor of a church that is paying 100% apportionments? Is it because *you want to be glorified*? Or, to use the terminology that Paul uses in our Epistle lesson, "Why do you proclaim yourself?"

It's a trap that's easy enough to fall into. The disciples fell into it; in our gospel reading we find them arguing about who is the greatest, who has paid the most apportionments, or who has collected the most for their mission team, or who serves on the most committees, or who gave the biggest special offering. We compare ourselves to others because, using Paul's words from our epistle lesson, we haven't seen the light of the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ. What's that gospel that Paul is talking about? Simply put, it's what Paul says in his letter to the Romans (8:38-39): I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that love is unlimited and eternal, and it's more precious than everything this world can possibly offer us. And because it's unlimited and eternal, *WE DON'T NEED TO COMPETE FOR IT! We don't need to show off for God because it doesn't make any difference in regards to his love. He loves you so much that he intends to heal you of your pretentiousness and pride so that you can get on with the business of loving other people without any concern about impressing them.*

To put this in the context of visioning, I would say that we have to put our egos aside and get on with the fundamental talk of loving each other NOW, then we can figure out how and where to extend that love into our community.

Finally, I would just mention that loving others is not just a matter of sacrificing ourselves for others; that's why I titled this sermon, "It's not about me, or is it?" It's true that being a disciple of Jesus Christ means making Jesus LORD of your life, following his commandments, obeying his will, but we remember that Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life and have it ABUNDANTLY. Serving Jesus Christ is really not about serving others AT YOUR OWN EXPENSE, but serving others FOR YOUR OWN BENEFIT. It reminds me of that riddle; The more you give it away, the more of it you have; what is it? Love defies the common rules of mathematics. You don't lose anything when you freely give your love to others but

rather you gain God's blessing as that love is returned to you by others perhaps but most certainly by God who smiles upon you and declares, "Well done, good and faithful servant." So you see, it IS about you. God's desire is that each human being reaches her or his full potential, that he or she is perfected in love and is free to develop his or her unique gifts, whatever they may be, in order to share those gifts with God and their fellow human beings. The kingdom of God is full of artists and teachers, doctors and musicians, cooks and athletes. Whatever your professional passion happens to be, God wants to help you realize your potential for your full joy and the joy of those who you serve with your gifts, SO YES IT IS ABOUT YOU, IT'S ABOUT YOUR FULNESS, YOUR COMPLETENESS, IT'S ABOUT THE GROWTH GOD PLANS TO INSTILL IN YOU.

So find your peace, knowing that you don't need to impress God or anyone else; he loves you beyond measure, and that is what really matters. And find your peace in doing the things that bring you the most joy, for the glory of God and for the benefit of the community.