

Accurate Assessments

2 Corinthians 4: 5-12; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

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On September 23, 1999, NASA engineers prepared to celebrate the entry of one of its spacecraft into the orbit of Mars. The orbiter traveled 10 months from earth to Mars for its mission of coordinating radio transmissions for future expeditions. Instead of celebrating, however, the NASA team suffered a devastating blow when the 125 million dollar orbiter disintegrated and crashed to the Mars surface.

The culprit of this calamity could have been any number of things. Various components of the craft were extraordinarily complex: the propulsion systems, the protective exterior, and the electronics. And then there were the unknowns of what might happen in the far reaches of space: asteroids, debris, who knows what. But none of those was the culprit. The engineering team made a simple mistake: they failed to make a conversion from metric units to English units in one of their calculations. This mistake, which any of us non-math kind of folks can understand, was compounded because NASA's system of checks and balances failed to detect the error. The result was a colossal and expensive failure.

Typically the lack of precision does not generate such catastrophic outcomes. An instrument with a small degree of inaccuracy will yield relatively precise measurements

over short distances or brief time periods. Yet over great distances and long measurement times, an imprecise instrument can lead to miscalculation and spell disaster.

The present moment in the coronavirus crisis should drive us to reevaluate decisions made previously gutting our medical and scientific preparedness, political calculation that minimized the epidemiological assessments, and communications that promoted fantasy rather than reality.

Like scientific instruments needing recalibration and systems of quality control needing review, the Church and its members benefit from a thorough assessment. Without doing so, the Church can find itself off track.

One of the undervalued spiritual disciplines, if it is understood as a spiritual discipline at all, is that of accurately assessing life. What is significant and what is periphery? What should we be paying attention to and what should we resist being distracted by? How accurate is the picture we carry of our world, of our relationships, of ourselves? Is our understanding of the nature of God, and what God seeks in relationship with human beings, and what God requires in our relationships with one another consistent with our practice?

When the Church makes a self-assessment, it typically does so by reviewing its doctrine, its mission, its practices, and its community life.

The most competent reviews are always done in light of the person of Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, comparing and contrasting Jesus with the church: the message Jesus delivered versus our message; the quality of life Jesus pursued for others and what the church pursues; the people whom Jesus served and who the church serves; the methodology Jesus employed and who we serve; Jesus' incarnation and passion, and the church's life. All of these should serve as standards for recalibrating the Church.

The words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians in our scripture passage today are words that can help the Church recalibrate. They are words that hone the precision of our mission so that over the long haul, we are more likely to hit the target of who we are called to be, what we are called to do and who we are called to serve. These words focus on the measure for the Church, which is Jesus Christ.

I would like you to hear the words from our scripture text in 2 Corinthians again, but this time from Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible called The Message.¹

“Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus to you.”

“It started when God said, ‘Light up the darkness!’ and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful. If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around

in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us."

"As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken."

"What they did to Jesus, they do to us – trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us – he lives!"

I want to focus on some areas of assessment from which the church might benefit by "recalibrating."

First, the Church and culture around us frequently fail to distinguish between the message and those who deliver the message. It is a natural but deadly mistake. People see the faults of the Church and assume the message is faulty too.

An accurate assessment that distinguishes between the messengers and the message is critical. We as the messengers are frail and faulty: the message of the Gospel of forgiveness and grace are as necessary to us as it is to anyone. The church needs God's grace in the midst of our brokenness and failure, as much as those to whom we might direct the message.

One aspect of assessment the church can benefit from is re-centering itself on the true nature of hope and salvation. That hope does not ultimately focus on our performance as the church, on our pristine doctrine or on our theology. It is not even how caring we are, or how warmly we greet visitors or how charismatic the clergy are.

Jesus is the center of hope and salvation. To the extent that the Church reflects Jesus Christ, reflects the embodiment of his love and his grace, his message of welcome and acceptance to outsiders, then people will have opportunity to encounter, not merely us, but God. When our life and message are consistent with Jesus, our witness is powerful.

At times, the Church performs splendidly. Yet, scratching beneath the veneer of the Church can reveal an ugly sight. We are not at our best all the time; it often seems that as time goes by the Church reaches new lows. Disciples of Jesus are plagued with sordid motives and short-sightedness and failure. We, as the church and as individual disciples of Jesus, we must be modest and humble instead of arrogant and prideful. We need the gospel of grace and salvation as much as anyone.

So our hope as the church cannot be in ourselves but in Jesus. And that hope must be for something more than favorable outcomes for ourselves, for our loved ones and families, for only the church community. The community Jesus created was a servant community who risked its own

life for others, that reaches beyond itself to those in desperate need.

The source of hope and the focus of the mission are essential elements to an accurate assessment. In addition, we must have a right understanding of hope itself.

Vaclav Havel – the playwright, author, first President of the Czech Republic, and conscience of Europe in the latter part of the 20th Century – Vaclav Havel observed, “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

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In order to have hope, one must trust that the Master has a master plan. And that is the difficult part because we cannot see how things came to be as they are and we do not see where they will play out in the future. I fear we the church do not understand that. We misapply the message of Jesus. Somehow it is all about us when in truth you and I are only a small part of it. The “making sense” part is where the church must recalibrate as well.

In an essay for the March 2009 issue of Harpers Magazine, Edward Hoagland reflected on his life of 70 plus years.² Edward had found old letters from failed love relationships hidden away in his room.

Merely holding the letters brought back fear of recriminations that his exes harbored toward him and that he remembered in these letters. For some reason, he read the letters anyway.

After reading them Edward realized that the harshness he anticipated in those letters was absent. Instead, he found that the words of those he had disappointed and failed were surprisingly filled with grace rather than condemnation.

Only by re-reading them at a time far removed was he able to see that. Edward was at a different place in his life. He was recalibrating on the basis of the long haul.

Perhaps some judgments we render quickly need to be held in suspension until life unfolds and the full story is told.

There is a tale from India about a water bearer who each day carried water from the river to his master's house. He used a long pole and from each end of the pole hung a large clay pot. After filling the pots with water, he would carry the pole across his neck for the long trek back to the house.

One of the pots eventually developed a crack in it, while the other remained perfect. By the time the water bearer reached the house, the pot with the crack in it leaked half its water out. For two years this situation went on.

Now the perfect pot was quite proud of his himself. He provided a full pot of water upon their arrival at the

master's house. But the flawed and cracked pot was ashamed of his imperfection, and miserable that it could only provide half a pot of water. Not being able to fulfill his purpose, the pot perceived itself to be a bitter failure. One day as the water bearer knelt by the stream to fill the pots, the imperfect and cracked pot spoke to the water bearer.

“I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you.”
“Why?” asked the water bearer. “Of what are you ashamed?”

“I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because of this crack in my side. The water leaks as we make our way back to the master's house. Because of my flaws, you don't get the full value from your efforts,” explained the pot.

The water bearer spoke to the imperfect pot, “As we return to the master's house, I want you to pay attention to what you see along the path.”

They made their way up the hill and the cracked pot took notice of beautiful flowers along the path, and this cheered him some. But when they reached the house, he felt bad again because half the water had leaked out.

The water bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it.”

He continue his explanation: “I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you’ve watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master’s table. Without you being just the way you are, we would not have this beauty to grace the house.”

It is indeed a mystery how God, in God’s providence, uses each one of us. Our perfection is not what brings significance; instead it is how the Lord uses us in the midst of our imperfection for God’s great purposes. As we make accurate assessments of the church, we must take into account our responsibilities and opportunities, and the grace of God that moves through our realities.

The Apostle Paul reminds us, “We have this treasure of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in clay jars so that all may see clearly ~ this extraordinary power to impact the world for good comes not from us but from God.”

¹ Eugene Peterson, The Message

² Edward Hoagland, “Curtain Calls”, Harpers Magazine, March, 2009

Mark Diehl
Grosse Pointe Memorial Church
Grosse Pointe Farms, MI