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“Accurate Assessments”

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2 Corinthians 4:5–12; Psalm 1

On September 23, 1999, NASA engineers prepared to celebrate the successful entry into Mars orbit of one of its spacecraft. The orbiter had spent 10 months traveling through space for its mission of coordinating radio transmissions with other Mars landing craft in the coming years. Instead of celebrating, however, the NASA team was shocked when the 125 million dollar orbiter disintegrated and crashed to the surface of Mars.

The failure was not because of manufacturing defect in its complex construction or the propulsion system or its electronics. Someone on the engineering team had made a simple mistake: they failed to make a conversion from metric units to English units on one part of their calculation. This mistake, which any of us 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 devastating outcomes. An instrument with a small degree of inaccuracy will yield relatively precise measurements over short distances or brief periods. Yet over great distances or long periods of time, an imprecise instrument can spell disaster.

Like scientific instruments needing recalibration and systems of quality control needing review, the Church and its members would benefit from a thorough assessment as well. 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? How accurate is the picture we carry of our world, of our relationships, of ourselves? What do we understand to be the nature of God and what God seeks in relationship with human beings? The Mission Study Committee has engaged parts of that task over the last several months.

When the Church makes a self-assessment, it typically does so by reviewing its doctrine, its mission, its practices, and its community life in light of Jesus Christ. The people that Jesus served, the message Jesus delivered, the quality of life Jesus worked toward, the methodology Jesus employed, the meaning of Jesus' incarnation and passion and death and resurrection—all of these may serve as a standard 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 what we are called to do and who we are called to be. 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 the culture around us frequently fail to distinguish between those who deliver the message and the message itself. It is a natural mistake. People see the faults of the Church and assume the message is misguided as well.

At times, the Church performs splendidly and may receive accolades for what it has done. However, if anyone scratches beneath the veneer of the Church’s surface, it can be an ugly sight. We are not at our best all the time, and often it seems the Church reaches new lows. Disciples of Jesus are plagued with sordid motives and short-sightedness and failure.

An accurate assessment that distinguishes between the messengers and the message is critical. We as the messengers are frail and faulty, and we need the message of the Gospel as much as those to whom we might direct the message.

The Church must re-center itself on the true nature of hope and salvation. That center is not our performance; it is not our pristine doctrine or theology. It is not how caring we are, or how personable or charismatic are the clergy. The cult of personality can kill the Church.

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 and teaching of hope, people will have opportunity to encounter God.

We need to assess what kind of message our congregation is communicating, and who is the focus of that message: Is it ourselves or Jesus Christ?

And, the Church must recalibrate itself on what provides substantive meaning and purpose to people.

We were having dinner with friends and one of our companions brought up a question. He had seen statistics about the percentage of people who believed their lives had significance. According to this article, the determiner of significance was that the individual believed he or she had a positive impact on someone else. The question he posed was, “Do you think that most people consider their lives to have significance?”

Before revealing the results, we shared our personal opinions. Some believed that a low percentage would consider their lives significant, while others guessed a high percentage.

The results of the survey indicated that over 90% of the responders believed they made a difference to someone or something, that their lives had significance.

I was surprised. I think human beings hope for significance, but struggle to feel significant.

As we talked, it became clear that even though all of us gathered around that table engage in critical tasks that enhance the quality and richness of living for others, such work does not automatically translate into a personal sense of significance. That fascinated and startled me. That group included a medical doctor, a teacher, a writer, and a minister. If that group could not point to positive outcomes and, therefore, have a sense of significance, then who could?

Vaclav Havel, the playwright, author, first President of the Czech Republic, and conscience of Europe in the latter part of the 20th century, 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.”

The typical human focus is to find meaning and comfort that something turns out well. If some event, as bad as it may be, can have an ultimately good outcome, often we are satisfied, at least temporarily. However, the “making sense” part is where much of the struggle exists.

That is the part in which one must trust that the Master has a master plan. And that indeed is the hard 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.

In an essay for the March 2009 issue of *Harpers Magazine*, Edward Hoagland reflected on his life of 70 plus years.²

Edward found some old letters from failed marital and love relationships of the past hidden away in his room. Merely holding the letters brought back fear of recriminations that his exes had directed toward him. Yet he read them anyway.

And after reading them, he realized that the harshness he remembered being in those letters was absent. As he re-read them, he found that the words of those he had disappointed and failed were surprisingly filled with grace and not condemnation.

Only by re-reading them at a later moment in time was he able to see that. He was at a different place; he was recalibrating on the basis of the long haul.

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

A wonderful tale from India is told about a water bearer who each day carried water back 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.

At some point, one of the pots 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 was only half full. This went on for two years.

Now the perfect pot was quite proud of his accomplishments, for he provided a full pot of water when they arrived at the master's house. But the flawed pot with the crack 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. So one day as the water bearer knelt by the stream to fill the pots, the one with cracks spoke to the water bearer.

"I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the water bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"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 out all the way back to the master's house, and because of my flaws, you don't get the full value from your efforts," explained the pot.

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

And as they made their way up the hill, the cracked pot took notice of beautiful flowers on the side of 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. 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 us.

In this interim period, our congregation is engaged in a time of making assessments. I hope we will remember the ultimate criteria for judging what is important.

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 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