

October 15th, 2023

Philippians 3:4-14 “Holy Imposter Syndrome”

For a few years, we had the privilege of having Katy Valentine as our associate minister here at First Christian Church. Katy has many gifts, but as far as her credentials are concerned, she was first and foremost a Bible scholar. And when I say, “Bible scholar” I’m not kidding around. She would present and defend papers at International Bible Scholar gatherings around the world. I was in awe of that. I’d say, “How do you do this? I can’t get my head wrapped around how you find these topics, do all this research, put all the data together in a way that make sense, then you put it out in front of a hundred other scholars so they can dissect this paper that you worked so hard on and then you’ve got to turn around and defend it right after they tear it apart. While you’re tired, hungry and jet lagged! I am in awe!” She said, “How is it that you come up with 50 plus sermons every year? You research them, interpret the text, find a way to make sense out of it all so you can give folks something to help them grow in knowledge and spirit. Then you turn around and do it all over again the next year and the year after that and the year after that! It takes me weeks to write a sermon! You preach once a week. *I am in awe!*” I said, “Well, that’s what I do.” She said, “It’s the same way with me and my scholarly work.” Ah. Different, but similar.

Even though we each had our specialties when it comes to ministry, Katy and I shared what some folks call “imposter syndrome.” No matter what kind of accolades we get for our respective ministries, we both live with this feeling that one of these days someone is going to discover that we’re fakes ... frauds and that we really don’t know what we’re doing. Someday, someone’s going to catch on and the gig will be up and we’ll have to surrender our credentials. Sounds silly, right? Come to find out, this is a common feeling that a *lot* of folks experience. Even when you have the credentials to prove it, you don’t think you’re good enough, smart enough or qualified enough to do your job.

Early in July I was visiting First Christian Church in Eugene, Oregon. When I made the appointment to visit the pastor, I discovered that their church administrator, Mary Sanders, was a high school classmate of mine who I hadn't seen in 38 years. Mary was giving me a tour of the church's clothing outreach center when I heard someone say, "Is that Jesse Kearns?" I turned around and there stood Dr. Sharon Warner, my doctoral advisor from Lexington Theological Seminary. We exchanged greetings and I said, "You know, Mary and I graduated together from Elmira High School almost four decades ago!" Sharon turned to Mary and said, "Jesse was my student at the seminary where I taught. He was such a good student ... he was thoughtful, intuitive, creative, hard-working ..." and as the compliments kept piling up, I thought, "Oh good heavens, she's getting me mixed up with someone else in our cohort!" So I said, "I think you're getting me mixed up with Greg Ott or David Walton because I dropped out of the program, remember?" And she said, "Yes, but all of those things are still true!" Then Mary puts the cherry on top of the sundae and said, "He was all those things in high school too." I'm like, "Stop it! You're *both* getting me mixed up with someone else."

I did some reading and discovered that Imposter Syndrome happens more often in vocations where a person's job involves convincing others that there's a path they can take to improve their lives by adopting changes. Professors, managers, salespeople, coaches, social workers, teachers ... even medical professionals can experience Imposter Syndrome. A lot of times, the professional might think, "I can't even get my own act together! Who am I to convince others that I've found a way to help them?" But we keep moving forward. We'll wince when we receive a compliment we don't think we deserve, but we do our best to work with what God gave us and try to be grateful.

That being said, we can't talk about Imposter Syndrome without mentioning the Dunning-Kruger effect. The Dunning-Kruger effect is kind of the opposite of Imposter Syndrome. At best, this is when a person thinks that they know more than they really do and speaks with authority about subjects in which they have no formal training. At worst

they speak with authority about subjects then know nothing about. To frame the Dunning-Kruger effect in simpler terms, the smarter someone thinks they are, the more ignorant they tend to be and the more confidence they have regardless of their ignorance. Now, to be clear, I am *not* a social psychologist and there is way more to the Dunning-Kruger effect that *I am not qualified to address*. But I do know that in the age of the internet, misinformation and conspiracy theories are spread by well-meaning yet ignorant people who take advantage of a world-wide network where anyone with or without knowledge about anything can post whatever they want whether it true or false. Meanwhile, David Dunning and Justin Kruger probably have stress-induced nightmares about their universities calling them up to inform them that because of a clerical error in their transcripts, the schools had to revoke their credentials and in order to get their credentials back, they have to re-take Calculus III or take the final exam for Calc III tomorrow.

So let's talk about this scripture Max read earlier. We're still in the book of Philippians and this week we've got a passage where Paul seems to be experiencing a bit of imposter syndrome. Sometimes Paul gets all wound up about his role as an apostle and he goes on these rambling tangents about his credentials and whether he's worthy of being an apostle. But we've got to give the guy a break because he's the only apostle who didn't follow Jesus during his earthly ministry. Jesus had 12 apostles during his time on Earth, then one of his apostles, Judas, betrayed him and was out of the picture. Then after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the apostles needed to find someone to replace Judas among the 12. According to Acts chapter 1, the replacement had to be "one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." (Acts 1:21-22) They found two candidates – Matthias and Barsabbas. They cast lots and Matthias went from being a disciple of Jesus to being the 12th apostle. So the conclusion we can make here in Acts 1 is that in order to be an apostle you had to be with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Makes sense, right? Well, nine

chapters later, we read the story of Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of Christians, who has a face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ. He then repented of his sins and was given a new mission as Paul the Apostle. It's one of the great foundational, inspirational stories of the New Testament.

Here's something I want you to consider. Let's say you are Peter, who was one of the first people Jesus called to be an apostle at the beginning of his ministry. You gave up everything to follow Jesus. You were there to witness Jesus' healings and hear his teaching. You were there when Jesus presided over the Passover meal that became known as the "Last Supper." You were there when Jesus was arrested, and although you were not there at his crucifixion, you were one of the first of the 12 to bear witness to the resurrected Christ. You were there when Jesus commissioned you and the 12 to go into all the world to proclaim the good news that God is reconciling the world through Christ. You were Jesus' right-hand man. Jesus called you the "rock on which I will build my church." Then one day while you were out doing what you were called to do, you find out that there's a guy who used to persecute Christians claiming to be an apostle. If you were Peter, how would you feel if a notorious persecutor of Christians came along and said, "I'm an apostle now because Jesus appeared to me and said so." Peter and Paul had a strained relationship to say the least.

Now put yourself in Paul's position. The risen Christ put the brakes on your mission to persecute Christians, blinded you, healed you, gave you a new name and then commissioned you as an apostle. You didn't ask for this. You didn't want the job. But this is the Risen Christ. How can you say, "no?" Now you've got other apostles questioning the legitimacy of your call. You've also got some churches that those other apostles established questioning your call. How would you feel? No wonder we get so many passages in the epistles where Paul gets flummoxed. On one hand, he's a Jewish-born, Roman-educated Pharisee who can trace his lineage back to the tribe of Benjamin. He was a big shot in his old circles

where those things mattered, but now here he is with these Christ-appointed credentials as an apostle! He writes,

“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

What about *our* credentials though? The Book of Hebrews states that we, as followers of Christ, are a “priesthood of all believers” which is part of what we affirm as a denomination. Some would go as far as to say that accepting our commission to go into all the world and proclaim the good news is as important as baptism and communion. We *all* participate in the mission and ministry of the church, or as our Affirmation of Faith states – “Within the universal church, we receive the gift of ministry and the light of scripture.” When I remind people about this, however, some people say, “Oh no. Not me. I’m not a minister. I’m not qualified. I don’t know what I’m doing.” I call this “holy imposter syndrome.” A youth minister I had during high school said, “I think you have gifts and graces for pastoral ministry.” I told him, “I don’t think so. I have some serious issues with the church!” He said, “That’s why you’d make a good pastor.” This has often, but not always, been true. Then I discovered the Disciples of Christ that affirms the gift of ministry, the light of scripture and how we *all* share in ministry regardless of vocation. This sure makes being a pastor less stressful. When you’ve got a congregation that says, “Yes” to God’s call to ministry, there is hope for the church. This is where I want to throw out a big “thank you” to Kevin, Joe, and Gary - our lay folks who stepped up to the plate to preach this summer. Thank you also to the elders, deacons, teachers, techies, musicians, tailors, artists, bakers, organizers, ministry coordinators, cooks, pray-ers, worship leaders, and helpers.

October is the “month of the ministry.” I sure appreciate the recognition you showed me last week as your pastor, but I don’t want you to forget that we are *all* ministers in the body of Christ. But maybe you’re still feeling some of that holy imposter syndrome. Maybe you’re thinking, “I am not a minister! I’ve done things in my past that totally disqualifies me from ministry! It’s cute that you think I’m a minister, but you’re getting me mixed up with someone else.” But let’s not forget what Paul says here in verses 12-14 of our scripture today - “This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” We have *all* been called. Let us, as a congregation here in Chico, embrace that heavenly call and carry out the ministry that God equips us to do.