

“Desperate to Please: the Fear of Disappointing Others”

Date: Oct. 11, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Unafraid, series

Texts: James 1:9; Ephesians 2:4-5

Theme: People-pleasing, fear, acceptance

At the end of each worship service, I stand in the narthex to greet people as they leave. On any particular Sunday several people may comment as they leave, “Nice sermon, pastor.” I could hear five of those compliments, but if there is that one person who says something critical or negative, do you know which one usually plays over and over again in mind for the rest of the day? You’re right – the one negative comment.

It seems as though human beings have a tendency to focus on the negative and to replay the critical words spoken, giving them more importance than they deserve. It stems from the fear of disappointing others.

Adam Hamilton reports that those in his church under the age of 50 say the fear of disappointing others is their second highest fear. Their number one fear was failing, which is closely related to this one. For many people, the worst words they can hear are “I’m disappointed in you.”

Many people spend their whole lives yearning to hear the words, “I’m proud of you,” from their parents,” feeling as though they are a disappointment when they didn’t hear those words. I suspect, throughout history people have always been anxious about disappointing others, or receiving criticism, or experiencing rejection.

But we live in a time when people have more opportunities to express disappointment, to offer criticism and to make public their rejection than ever before. Text messages, where you don’t see the person’s face, have become a common way for young couples to break up. It’s heartbreaking.

Online comments have become an easy way to express disappointment in a person, a product or a service you didn't like. Facebook has become a battleground for expressing opinions, and dislike for those with whom you disagree. Although I don't use Twitter, I know that it too has become a weapon of words.

It seems as though we are quick to criticize, quick to unfriend and quick to dismiss other people. And all of that negativity is hurtful, even if we don't see it. Maybe that's why digital communication has become so popular; you don't have to face the consequences of your words. We have more ways to zing people and we don't have to take responsibility.

Jesus might have had our era in mind when he gave some of his most often cited advice. Such as the Golden Rule: "You should treat other people in the same way you want people to treat you." (Mt. 7:12) He also said that the second greatest commandment is to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." (Mt. 22:39)

Further, he told his disciples: "Take the log out of your own eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the speck out of neighbor's eye." (Mt. 7:5) We could also add the words from our first lesson today. St. James offers these words of advice on how to interact with others: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry." (James 1:19)

These words of scripture should lead a Christian to ask, "Before I post this comment, share this tweet, offer this meme, or write this review, does it reflect the way I would want to be treated? Am I reflecting love? Am I pointing out the shortcomings of others when I myself have the same or worse shortcomings?"

Knowing that all people are vulnerable to criticism and disappointing others, we should weigh our words carefully, so we "do no harm," a

reminder from our founder, John Wesley. If we consider how we ourselves want to be treated, it may change the way we engage in political conversations in the coming weeks.

Now then, we all experience disappointments, criticism and rejection when we don't meet other people's expectations. Sometimes they are right to be disappointed. Sometimes we've blown it. In those cases, the criticism or disappointment is an opportunity to grow and improve – and who doesn't need to do that?

Criticism can be a gift if we receive it as such. I've learned that one of the best things I can do is to own my own mistakes as quickly as possible, and to humbly ask for forgiveness. You know, I used to think that it was bad to make mistakes or to disappoint people.

But I've learned its part of being human. We all make mistakes. It was grossly arrogant to believe I could be perfect and never make a mistake. Accepting that I'm human, accepting that I *will* make mistakes and disappoint people from time to time, has taken a great deal of pressure off of myself. I've also seen, time and again, that a well-timed and sincere apology goes a long ways in healing a hurt relationship. At times it even earns the respect of the person to whom it is offered.

Many people, though, *suffer* from the fear of disappointing others. It can cause them to do things they don't want to do, out of fear of disappointing the other person. It can cause them to be paralyzed by anxiety, constantly living in an anxious state, fearful they will say or do something which might disappoint another person. It's an awful way to live.

Some people struggle so much with the fear of disappointing others that we might describe them as people-pleasers, or approval-addicts. One psychologist explained it this way: "Typically, the intense need to please

and care for others is deeply rooted either in a fear of rejection and/or a fear of failure. Fear of rejection is the underlying feeling that, “If I don’t do everything I can to make this person happy, then they might leave me or stop caring for me.” (Professor Sherry Pagoto, University of Massachusetts Medical School)

I confess I am a recovering people-pleaser. Much of my life has been spent in fear of letting people down, worrying about what people say or think about me. As I’ve aged I’ve developed a thicker skin and greater willingness to say and do those things I believe are right, even if it means criticism is sure to follow. I’ve learned I’ll never be able to please everyone. When I’m wrong, when I make mistakes, I do my best to make amends as quickly as possible. But I don’t chastise myself simply for being human.

There are also times in life when we have to say and do things which will not be universally popular. Parents cannot be their children’s best friends; they need to offer discipline, even when their kids tell them they’re awful parents. Being a good manager means offering feedback to employees to help them do their job better. It may not make you popular but it will help the company to improve.

Among the consequences of people-pleasing are the high cost of living with constant anxiety, a lack of boundaries as you can’t say “no” to anyone, and a lack of self-care. If you’re always trying to please others, you forget how to care for yourself in healthy ways. People-pleasing is not a healthy way to live.

Such a way of life can also distort your perception of who God is. If we spend our whole life trying to please others, it can very easily translate into our relationship with God, believing God will *only* love us if we do good things. If we make mistakes, then God will be angry with us and will stop loving us. Many people never feel “good enough” and they fear God.

This is where I believe the Christian Gospel, rightly understood, is so powerful. Jesus devoted most of his time to connecting with, teaching and ministering to “sinners.” He ate with them, befriended them, healed them, and taught them about God’s mercy and love.

He did this before they did anything that would make them worthy of God’s kindness. This is what is meant in the Bible by the word grace. Grace is undeserved kindness, blessing, mercy and love. Grace is grace *precisely* because we can’t earn it.

Listen to these words from the book of Ephesians: “God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love he has for us. You are saved by God’s grace.” (Ephesians 2:4-5)

Paul Tillich, one of the great 20th century philosophers and theologians is known for one of his greatest sermons entitled “You Are Accepted.” In it he said, “You are accepted...Simply accept that you are accepted.” My friends, if you can do that, you have experienced grace.

When we finally trust in this grace, this acceptance and love of God, we can stop trying to manipulate others into giving love and acceptance to us by our niceness. We can truly live and love, without expecting anything in return.

I hope *you* have experienced this kind of grace, so that you can truly live without the fear of being rejected, or paralyzed by criticism. Even Jesus himself was criticized, and told us that if we follow him, we probably will be too. I pray that you have or will experience this kind of God-given acceptance, which frees you from the fear of disappointing others. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book: *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Convergent Books, 2018, pp. 92-103.