

A Painful Question?

How do other people see me and should I care?

While I was attending a local pastor cluster, one of those in attendance shared that, on a recent Sunday, as usual, he collected the comment cards following the service. These cards usually hold prayer needs, questions about the message, or words of encouragement. This Sunday it was different. One of those cards held words that were biting and critical of both the message and the direction of the church. The pastor was stunned and bore that pain alone for much of the day before sharing it with his lead elder.

After some discussion and prayer, it was decided to invite the author of the note into conversation with the elder and the pastor. A full day and more prayer followed before the meeting. When all parties were gathered at the table, another shock hit the pastor. The author of the critical note allowed him to speak first, laying out his vision for the church and how the current message series fit into that vision. When he was done, the pastor turned the conversation over to the author and was again shocked. The author of the note spoke of coming to a painful point of conviction regarding attitude and actions that had hurt the pastor and may have been hurting others as well. The point of conviction centered on the grim question, "What is it like to be on the other side of me?" In the end, the journey toward healing and reconciliation was started. At the cluster, the pastor shared this tale under the heading of praises!

But what can we learn from this? First, we need to be willing to ask that difficult question of ourselves as pastors and leaders: "What is it like to be on the other side of me?" How do my words, actions, inactions, and attitudes impact others? More importantly, how do they impact the Gospel message and its impact in our communities? We need to be careful here to stress that we are not talking about people pleasing and trying to make everybody happy. We are talking about how the messages we send are in fact sent. Is there a tone to the voice, a raising of an eyebrow, a dismissal of pain we do not feel, an expectation we disregard? All these and more can say one thing when our words are trying to say something else.

Second, we need to be careful listeners. The author of the note was listening to the Sunday messages with a set of filters in place that were focused on personal expectations and not those aligned with the vision of the church and the Word of God. Here we need constant a reminder to strive to get ourselves out of the way and to try to see others through the eyes of Christ. To quote Timothy Keller from his book *"The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness,"*

"...the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less."

Third, we can learn the value of having a good friend in the middle of a dispute. Good friends can bring a different perspective and a calming spirit into the pain and chaos of the moment. And a good friend is willing to step into the conflict in an effort to bring peace and reconciliation to the broken relationship. It is my prayer that all of us have friends like this.

Finally, we need to have healthy boundaries in place. In other words, have someone else collect the comment cards on Sunday, not the pastor! If you need to read them, let someone else read them first.

Now, I need to go reflect on a question.

In Christ,
Kelley Johnson,
NCD Pastoral Care