

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 11, 2020

ISAIAH 25:1-9 | PSALM 23 | PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9 | MATTHEW 22:1-14

Earlier this week, I received my monthly email from Google telling me about how the church website turns up in people's search results. Since we've moved so much of our programming online since March, I've been working on getting our website to show up on the first page of results for things people search for: "Wyckoff church." "Lutheran Bergen county" "Incredibly funny clergy with a great sense of style." The easiest way to do this is by placing strategic words on your website. The more complicated way is getting people to leave a review.

Reviewing a church on Google or Yelp! or whatever feels a little weird. Since most people aren't members of churches they actively dislike, most reviews of churches are about what you would expect. *I am a member here. Five stars. Love my friends. Five stars.* But it's the bad reviews that really catch your attention. Not long ago I came across a review for a Lutheran church in Wisconsin from someone who went to a family service on Christmas Eve and discovered that there were Too Many Kids. *One star.*

But these reviews actually raise an interesting theological question for us to consider. What makes a church good? How do we evaluate church? Is a church good when it's full of people you like? Is a church good when there are no kids around who might get in the way of your experience of God? Is a church good when the sanctuary provides an inspiring place for reflection? Is a church good when it helps a lot of people? The reason church reviews are funny is because we really have no idea what we're supposed to be reviewing in the first place.

Today's reading from Philippians is about what it means to be a "good" church. It begins with some sort of boilerplate stuff. Rejoice in the Lord. Let your gentleness be known. The Lord is near. This is just kind of a recap of everything that's come before. But then St. Paul writes something kind of interesting. "If there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Think about and focus on excellence.

When we think of excellence, we usually mean something is close to perfect. If someone is an excellent athlete, they transcend what we think the human body can do. If someone is an excellent musician, they make the notes on the page come to life. If someone is an excellent cook, they combine flavors in new and interesting ways. To be excellent is to be the very best at what you do. Close to perfect. Close to ideal. As good as you can get.

And we can take that idea and bring it into church. Jason's prelude was excellent when it was done without any mistakes. The acolytes were excellent when they stood at the right places at the right times. The sermon was excellent because you agreed with it. The assisting minister was excellent when they pronounced every word correctly. The giving program was excellent because it was run with no hiccups. *Five stars.*

We often feel pretty confident that we know what we're good at. There was a business book that was big about ten years ago called *Strengthfinders* that seemed to capture this perfectly. It was a kind of personality inventory where you took a quiz and it gave you your five strengths like Learner, Focus, Empathy, and gave you ways you could improve on your strengths. What was funny about *Strengthfinders* was that it would not even tell you anything outside of your top five because if you weren't good at it already, you were never going to be any good at it. So why even bother? Don't try to improve your weaknesses, just get as close to perfection as you can.

Strengthfinders didn't have it wrong. They just made the thing we think sometimes explicit. That we shouldn't invest in things we're not already good at because it's not efficient. You don't get enough out of it for your time, your effort, your money, your sweat. If somebody else could do it better, just have them do it. You can achieve more, you can come closer to excellence, when you're more efficient.

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But that kind of excellence isn't what Paul's talking about. What makes something excellent isn't how close to perfect it is. What makes something excellent, Paul suggests, is how it reflects the love of God in Christ Jesus. He even gives us this nice list. What makes something excellent is whether it is true, honorable, just, pure, and lovely. Those are not attributes you can rank, judge, or achieve. They are about intentions and integrity.

Which means excellence isn't something we achieve for ourselves by hard work and talent. It's something we receive as a gift. When Paul says that we should think about excellence, he doesn't mean we should use the power of positive thinking to get closer to perfection. He means we should pay attention to the ways that we reflect the love of Christ in our lives. Excellence isn't about outcomes or strengths. It's about a posture of trust that we have worthwhile things to share and orientation of openness to how other people benefit from our gifts.

So a community of people whose common life is animated by the Holy Spirit is going to pursue excellence in a radically different way. The question of whether something is excellent isn't how close to perfect it is, how efficient the outcome is. It's how just we are in our relationships, how true we are in our witness, and how honorable we are in our dealings. Whether it's in Philippi or Wyckoff, a community gathered together by the Holy Spirit is going to follow Jesus by being deliberately inefficient.

This is getting pretty vague, so let me try to get a little more specific here. And for the sake of clarity, let's just focus on churchy stuff. Our inclination is often to do things in the most efficient, most excellent way possible. Jason is the best musician in the church, and so Jason should do all the music. Carol Brighton knows how to organize the backpack collection in the fall, so Carol should run all of the collection programs. Janet Schulz knows more about plants than anyone else, so Janet should get to decide anything involving greenery. Lilly Joseph makes the best art of anyone in church, and so Lilly should do all the bulletins. If what you want is excellence, that's what you want. Flawless liturgies. Delicious coffee hours. Rapturous music. If you popped in one Sunday, you would definitely give it *Five Stars*.

But how would that community actually function? It would be impossibly terrible. Some people would think that they were the only people who knew how to run "their" program. Other people would become viewers or consumers instead of participants. And, most important, it would mean giving up the very thing that makes us unique. We don't try to put out the best "product" we can every week. We provide opportunities for people to use their gifts in service to the world, even if there's an easier, better, or more efficient way to do things.

To be a community that is deliberately inefficient means that there's space here for grace. In a world where only the very best can get ahead, where you always have to be at the top of your game, where you always have to hustle to stay afloat, where every redundancy has to be purged, we create space where we can be faithful even while we fail.

We don't judge people's contributions based on how close they are to perfect but on how they reflect the love of God. If you reflect the love of God by baking but you can't tell the difference between sugar and salt, you can do that here. If you reflect the love of God by singing but you can't hold a tune, crack open your hymnal. If you reflect the love of God by organizing rummage but you don't know how much an old plate should cost, grab a label maker. Knock yourself out. If you reflect the love of God by being an acolyte but you never know where you're supposed to be, go get robed up. Because this community is enriched, enlivened, and enlarged by your presence.

What kind of review would that church get? Probably not great. It wouldn't get five stars. It might get three. Maybe two. In the eyes of most people, it wouldn't be very good. But why would you ever want to be good when you could be excellent?

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