

August 24, 2014
Church Planting
Living with Criticism
Acts 11:1-4, 18

Opening words: Grace Coolidge, the wife of President Calvin Coolidge, tried to surprise her husband by having his portrait painted. When it was finished, she hung it in the library of the White House. Later the same morning, the President happened to walk into the library accompanied by a senator. They stared at the picture together in silence. Finally Coolidge commented quietly: "I think so, too." Today's message is about how to handle criticism.

In the text for today, Peter returns to Jerusalem and is confronted by some negative people. They wanted to know if the rumor was true. Had he been interacting with non-Jews? In other words, Peter has been interacting with people like us, Gentiles. Such behavior violated Old Testament law. Peter had opened himself up to criticism. Have you ever been criticized? This morning's scripture lesson is Acts 11:1-4, 18. Let me call this message *Living with Criticism*.

Acts 11:1-4, 18 ¹The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story.

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

One of my favorite personalities in church history is English evangelist George Whitefield (1714-1770). He was one of the finest preachers the church has ever known. However, that does not mean he was not without his enemies. He was not really concerned about them, because he was more interested in pleasing God. At one point, Whitefield received a vicious letter accusing him of some wrongdoing. His reply was brief and courteous. He wrote:

I thank you heartily for your letter. As for what you and my other enemies are saying against me, I know worse things about myself than you will ever say about me.

With love in Christ, George Whitefield

This is my question for you today. Have you ever been criticized? If so, then this message is for you! If you have ever been criticized, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves this morning in the eleventh chapter of Acts. When we last left Peter, the church was a happy place. The Holy Spirit was moving and the church was growing. New converts were being welcomed, including Gentiles. There is really nothing to complain about, but this is the church. Drama has been part of church history from the very beginning. According to the text, Peter has returned to Jerusalem. His spirit must have been high. After all, everyone wants a growing church, or do they? According to verse three, he is greeted by some negative voices. The author describes them as circumcised believers. We would call them Christians or "completed Jews". They want to know why he has broken a long standing rule, associating with Gentiles. Peter defends himself by simply telling the truth. In the verses between our reading for today, Peter tells them exactly what happened. It is what we have talked about in the past few weeks. God summons a Gentile, Cornelius, to summon Peter to his community. When he arrives, he tells the group about Jesus, and before the end of the day they are all converted. It is God who welcomed these Gentiles into the church by the sending of the Holy Spirit. There is not really much to say. If God is for it, then who can be against it? Verse eighteen says it clearly, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, *'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'*" I wish I handled all my criticizers so easily.

I fell in love with this story the first time I read it. The point of the story was painfully clear. Peter was one of the greatest figures in the church. Just think of everything he did for God. He followed Jesus for three years and experienced the Master first hand. He was part of the inner circle, so he received special instruction. He was bold enough to get out of the boat and walk on the water for a few precious steps. He announced to the world for the very first time that Jesus was the Messiah. It was Peter who ran to the tomb on Easter morning to witness it for himself. It was Peter who spoke to the crowd before the winds of Pentecost blew. It was Peter who spoke to another crowd after the winds blew. It was Peter who healed the cripple (Acts 3). It was Peter who welcomed the Gentiles. Peter did so much; Peter was so much. If there is anyone who does not deserved to be criticized it was Peter. But, in the story for today, Peter was criticized by people who had done nothing notable at all.

Admit It!

It is not just true of the church, it is true in life. Everyone gets criticized. That is what makes being a position of authority so difficult. Let me ask you this series of questions.

1. Have you ever criticized your doctor for some oversight?
2. Have you ever criticized your local school board for not doing it your way?
3. Have you ever criticized a politician for being out of touch?
4. Have you ever criticized a professional athlete or celebrity for being themselves?
5. Have you ever criticized your minister for not being there at the right time?
6. Have you ever criticized God for the condition of our world?

It is my experience that people in positions of authority have grown deaf to all the criticism. They know what we are trying to deny.

Just admit it, like or not, everyone gets criticized. Aristotle once said, "*To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing.*" The goal is not to eliminate criticism. The goal is handling criticism well. How well do you handle criticism? If you have ever been criticized, say, "**Amen!**" You and Peter have something in common. You have both been criticized.

Embrace It!

Did you know the idea of the employee suggestion box started in Japan in 1721? That means it is 293 years old. Did you know, according to the NASS, the National Association of Suggestion Systems, only 3% of American companies have a suggestion box? I wonder why there aren't more, because those companies who use suggestion boxes have saved two billion dollars. Could it be 97% of American companies don't have suggestion boxes because they don't want to open themselves up for criticism? How open are you to criticism? I hope you are not like 97% of American companies. I hope you are open to criticism, because constructive criticism can make you a better person.

Here are three things you need to know the next time you are criticized.

- 1. The next time you are criticized, evaluate the source.** There are some people you want to listen to and some you don't. Just because they have an opinion doesn't make them an expert. You would be a fool to take advice from a fool. You would be a fool to listen to everyone.
- 2. The next time you are criticized, evaluate your core values.** That is what Peter did in today's story. He was more concerned with pleasing God than man. Everyone's core values are different. Did your action support your core values? In other words, who are you trying to please?
- 3. The next time you are criticized, evaluate your action.** I do not want to shock you, but you do not know everything. You do not do everything perfectly, nor do I. The people who offer you productive criticism are the most valuable people in your life because they want you to become a better person. It is not easy to do, but respect their honesty.

In the scripture lesson for today, Peter didn't run from the criticism. He didn't ignore the criticism. Peter embraced the criticism and reminded himself that what he did was right! You may not be perfect, but there are times when you did the right thing! If you have done just one correct thing in your life, say, "**Amen!**"

Forget It

This is not the first time Peter was criticized. You remember the story. Peter once told Jesus he would never betray him, yet a short time later Peter did three times (John 18:15-27). He must have regretted those words. When the resurrected Jesus came back, he looked for Peter and reminded him of his betrayal.

The Master reinstates Peter by asking him the same question three times, "*Do you love me?*" Each time Peter responded, "*You know I love you*" (John 21). For Peter, that must have been an emotional day. Yet, that wasn't the end of Peter. He learned from that experience and moved forward. We never hear about his betrayal again. Are you stuck in the past, remembering that day you were criticized? Don't you think it is time to forget it and do something for Jesus today? If you think you can remember those three things, say, "**Amen!**" Admit it! Embrace it! Forget it!

In the spring of 1989, I was interviewed to be the pastor of the Hathaway United Methodist Church in Garfield Heights, Ohio. I remember next to nothing about that interview, except the greatest challenge facing that church. It was a stagnant, aging congregation. They were hoping to rebuild their congregation. (Does that sound familiar? It sounds like every congregation in the mainline congregation world.) Over the next five years, we experienced some success. Their progress was stymied when I came here. They are now closed.

During my time there, I learned why they hadn't grown in decades. It had nothing to do with demographics. However, the community was predominantly retired Catholics. Hathaway didn't grow for the same reason most churches don't grow. A small group had seized control and smothered any new life. The small group does not mean to be controlling. Usually, they are sincere people who believe they know what is best for the whole. Sometimes, the controlling group includes the pastor. Sometimes, it does not. In Hathaway's case, the pastor had very little control. The controlling group was one family, the "Leadbellies" (not their real name). They ruled by intimidation. That family consisted of two generations. There was the father and mother, Paul and Gladys. They had two adult sons, Jim, who can best be described as a "junkyard dog", and Paul. They had two wives, Cindy and Judy. The six Leadbellies dominated every committee within the life of the church. The church may have been called Hathaway, but it could have been renamed the Leadbelly United Methodist Church. If that church was ever going to grow, then the Leadbellies had to be dethroned from power. I only had one thing going for me. I was the chair of the nominating committee. In my first two years in that parish, I nominated anyone who wasn't afraid of the Leadbellies. The Leadbellies were controlling, but they were not stupid. They confronted me in every way to hold on to the power. One thing was clear. The church had to choose between them and me. Without the support of other church members, I would have been gone. One man made it possible for me to stay. My last three years in Garfield Heights were wonderful, because the Leadbellies were gone. They left in a pile of ugly words pointed at me. They wrote those words down and sent them to the church's administrative board, my District Superintendent and the Bishop. I never heard from the District Superintendent or the Bishop. However, the board chair called me and we met. Alone, he read me the letter with the ugly words. In colorful language, they said I was the problem because I was suffering from some kind of mental illness. He asked me if I wanted to respond. I did. I said, "Maybe they are right? They are not the first to think I am crazy." We laughed and the topic never came up again. Let me end with three questions.

Question #1: Have you ever been criticized? The answer is yes. You might as well admit it. Everyone has been criticized. If you don't want to be criticized, then do nothing at all. Then, people will criticize you for doing nothing. Being criticized is just part of life. Perhaps, question #2 is a better question.

Question #2: How do you handle criticism? You only have two options. Either, you can ignore it or you can embrace it. Dismiss the criticism that comes from fools or people who have an agenda. Embrace the criticisms that come from people who are trying to make you a better person.

Question #3: How long do you hold on to criticism? I hope not long. The best criticisms are designed to improve your life, not damage it. This is the day the Lord has made, rejoice and be glad in it. Norman Vincent Peale once said, "*The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"