
The Missional Connection

Manuscript by Bonnie Beam and Stephen Berger for the Authenticity in a Culture of Masks Retreat

What was that group exercise like for you?

How did you feel as the “presenter”?

How did you feel as the “listener”?

It required some vulnerability, right? Masks were off. It might have been difficult. You might have felt frightened to share a certain memory or experience. You were unsure how your “authentic self” was going to be received. Wasn’t it easier to listen? You weren’t on the hot seat. You weren’t the only one being vulnerable. But, if you were truly listening, you still had to be emotionally engaged at some level, right?

Dr. Brené Brown, courage and shame researcher, calls this empathy. It is a kind of active listening that allows the other person’s experience to resonate with your own experiences. Of course, you can listen with your mask on and keep the other person’s feelings at arm’s length, or you can listen with vulnerability and allow your own emotions to connect with what the person is sharing.

Show Brené Brown empathy video clip¹.

Imagine creating a culture in our churches where everyone is encouraged to be honest about himself or herself, gives and receives empathy, is able to safely relate to each other as fellow travelers on this road to Christlikeness, and is deeply dependent on God’s healing and transforming work within.

Didn’t Christ say that His followers will be known by their love? Love is a risky thing, though. It requires vulnerability. Love without vulnerability is simply charity. If we can learn to be vulnerable with each other and become known as loving people, our churches will be far more appealing to non-believers. We will be more authentic. People will see Christ in us, and we will be able to invite others into this journey of authenticity and transformation. We will be a missional church.

The mission of the Church of the Nazarene is to make Christlike disciples in the nations. However, we don’t make Christlike disciples by gritting our teeth and trying harder to be like Christ. Christlike disciples are made when we are real, when we are willing to admit our wrongs and mistakes, when we surrender to God’s will, and when we ask God to transform us.

1. Brené Brown. Brené Brown on Empathy (The RSA, 2013), 2 min., 53 sec., digital video. <http://Brenebrown.com/videos> or https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=10&v=1Evwgu369Jw&feature=emb_logo.

The power that raised Christ from the dead is a transforming power, and we all need that power to do a transforming work within us, heal our wounds, relieve our fears, and overcome our temptations. And we need others to walk with us as we go through this process together.

We have all heard someone testify in church and say something like this... “When I entered this church, I felt at home, like I could be myself.” Or, “When I met her, she accepted me and loved me, even though I was a mess.”

Sadly, if we accept our neighbor or the newcomer in church, faults and all, but we aren't real about our own shortcomings, we are wearing masks. We create a false sense of perfection. If we are not honest about our areas of struggle, shortcomings, and failures, then we inadvertently appear to have it all together. We need to be real about what the process of sanctification is like, so we don't perpetuate a culture of perfectionism. Our mask of silence hides what is truly happening inside of us – or what ISN'T happening.

When we have masks on, it doesn't take long for a new person in the church to pick up on the unwritten rules of the masked life.

1. Always be pleasant and happy.
2. Don't talk about your weaknesses or struggles.
3. Try hard to conform your behaviors to Christlikeness.

These rules need to be broken! Our transformation into Christlikeness is God's work, and we need to let people see how Christ accomplished that in our personal lives. Unfortunately, without us sharing what the sanctifying process is like and being vulnerable about the areas that still need God's sanctifying touch, new believers may rely on themselves instead of God to change their thoughts and behaviors. When they realize Christlikeness is not possible on their own, they may resort to wearing a mask to hide the lack of Christlikeness or leave to avoid hypocrisy.

Sometimes, we look at other people who are trying really hard to “behave correctly” and we think, “They have it all together.” We do not hear them talk about their emotional wounds. We do not hear them share their fears and temptations, so we assume they do not have any. Yet didn't Christ, on the night before He was crucified, invite His disciples to join Him as He prayed through His emotional struggle?

Authenticity is not about “arrival at a destination.” Authenticity is about being open and honest about the journey. We need to create safe spaces where we can be honest. We need to build safe relationships where we are encouraged to embrace our identity as “loved by God” and where we spur one another on toward surrender to the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work. We need mutual sharing, vulnerability, empathy, and godly counsel. We need authenticity.

Authenticity is an indispensable characteristic of a missional church. Yet, authenticity is one of those tricky words, like humility. If you are convinced you have it, then it is likely that you don't. Authenticity is something we strive for, but it is less of a destination and more of a daily choice. It is never a straight line from being inauthentic to being authentic.

It is more like a heart monitor or the stock market graph. We know that this is not a perfect journey, but if we want to be the missional people of God, we must commit to taking the journey together, acknowledging the perfectly imperfect journey.

Jason Vickers writes that “what is ascribed to the church in [the creeds] is like the kingdom of God itself, an eschatological reality to which the church bears witness and toward which the church lives and strains, however imperfectly.” He reminds the Church “not to succumb to denial, despair or resignation. To do so underestimates the power of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the church right here and now,” and the Holy Spirit will enable the church to be what it has been called to be². As Kingdom citizens living in the present reality of the Kingdom, one that has come and is coming, we are called to authenticity.

There are probably a number of measuring lines we could use as we consider what authentic living looks like in our lives and in our churches, but perhaps there is none better than finances. Money, stewardship, mammon – they are all biblical terms. Of course, other measuring lines would include justice, caring for the poor and marginalized, lives of obedience to God, love of neighbor, but notice that all of these themes are connected to money and possessions in one way or another. As Walter Brueggemann has reminded us; “we are called to live toward the common good,”³ and that most certainly involves how we handle finances.

If our church is to be truly authentic, open, honest, and vulnerable, it must demonstrate this authenticity in its finances. The problem is that we don’t talk about money. Many pastors are hesitant to preach and teach on biblical stewardship management topics. Many (maybe most) of us live with a scarcity mentality. We live like there is only so much to go around and we have to get and keep our piece of the scarcity pie. We have forgotten that God’s Kingdom is a kingdom of abundance.

Money is also a very intimate issue. Henri Nouwen writes: “Money conversations are a greater taboo than conversations about sex or religion” in the church as well as in culture. “The reason for the taboo is that money has something to do with that intimate place in our heart where we need security, and we do not want to reveal our need or give away our security to someone who, maybe only accidentally, might betray us.”⁴ We must ask ourselves a question: If God is truly our security, why does money hold such a “sacred” place in our hearts, and even in our churches, that we cannot talk about it?

When we move toward real authenticity about finances, both personally and as a church body, we will become a desirable community. Those who are in bondage to a financial memory or a current money crisis, as well as those who live with financial shame, will find a community to which they will want to belong.

Here are four principles that will help form us into this kind of church and people, four principles that we can live by as we journey toward who God has called us to be.

2. Vickers, Jason E. *Minding The Good Ground* Waco, Texas (Baylor University Press, 2011), p.40.

3. Brueggemann, Walter. *Journey To The Common Good* Louisville, KY (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p.1

4. Nouwen, Henri J.M. *A Spirituality of Fundraising* Nashville (Upper Room Books, 2010), pp. 30-31

1. As a missional church and as God's beloved, we want our lives to be characterized by grateful contentment.
2. As a missional church, our worldview is one of abundance not scarcity.
3. As a missional church, we are committed to the common good.
4. As a missional church, we intentionally partner together in an authentic community.

We want our lives to be characterized by grateful contentment as God's beloved because we see our world through the lens of God's abundant love. We can truly seek the common good because we understand that our "net worth" is not the sum total of our assets on a balance sheet. We are content in God's daily promises and provision, His abundant redeeming grace, and the knowledge that we are God's beloved. This kind of contentment releases shame's grip on our lives. It does not happen in an instant. It is a lifelong journey of spiritual formation that must happen in our communities. We make this journey together.

Our worldview is one of abundance, not scarcity. In Matthew 6:26, Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" In this short passage, Jesus says five times, "don't worry." This stands in stark contrast to the prevailing worldview of economics that studies the efforts of individuals and communities to make the best use of *finite resources* to meet the *infinite demand* for goods and services. God's people have a long history of struggling with this scarcity mentality. In the midst of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve felt they lacked something that the forbidden fruit offered. In the Exodus story, God provided manna for the children of Israel with the promise that "there will be enough each day for everyone." Yet, there were those who hoarded more than they needed for that day, and by morning, it was rotten. As a missional church, we believe God has, and will, provide all that we "need."

We are also committed to the common good. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the story of the children of Israel in Exodus gives three "peculiar claims" to Kingdom citizens (missional churches).

- "Persons living in a system of anxiety and fear—and consequently greed—have no time or energy for the common good."
- "An immense act of generosity is required in order to break the death grip of the system of fear, anxiety, and greed. God did that for Israel. The Church has been called to do that for our world. We are called to re-enact the generous acts of God."
- "Those who are immersed in such immense gifts of generosity are able to get their minds off themselves and can be about the work of the community not about the entitlements of the self."⁵

5. Brueggemann, *Journey To The Common Good* pp.28-29.

If the church only echoes the world's kingdom of scarcity, it has failed its calling. As a missional church, we own and live into the call to the common good.

Finally, we intentionally partner together to form an authentic community. Six times in his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul used a form of the Greek word *koinonia* to describe the relationship he feels with these brothers and sisters in Christ. This word is translated as partners, partnership, fellowship, and sharing. Shame pulls us to a place of aloneness and isolation, but true *koinonia* – fellowship and partnership – brings us together. As we intentionally journey together in honesty, vulnerability, and empathy, we will thrive.

As we build this authentic community, we must always seek and welcome others into this fellowship, into this journey of love and authenticity. The song, "Come As You Are," by David Crowder, captures the unconditional love and acceptance that we find in Christ.

So, lay down your burdens
Lay down your shame
All who are broken
Lift up your face
Oh wanderer, come home
You're not too far
So, lay down your hurt
Lay down your heart
Come as you are

Imagine the impact if our churches, our authentic missional communities, cultivated the same spirit of love and acceptance. Imagine creating an atmosphere of honesty and empathy where everyone has a community to walk with them in their journey toward Christlikeness. Imagine a church that is the hands and face of God described in Psalm 145:14, "The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down." (NIV) Let us lift up the face of those that feel broken and abandoned, so they can see God's face of love. Let us be an authentic community of broken people in the process of healing and transformation. Let us seek and embrace the broken and hurting in our world and invite them into this healing community and relationship with Christ.