

The Gifts of Imperfect Pastoring

2 Corinthians 8:10b-12 by Patty Friesen

2 Cor. 8:10-12 “It is appropriate for you who began last year to do something, to finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have.” Apostle Paul’s words to “finish doing what you started – for the eagerness is acceptable even if you don’t always have what it takes” hit me last summer as I was considering whether to stay on as permanent pastor here at Osler Mennonite.

I took on the interim job last year because I didn’t really have anything else to do and was willing to try anything for a year and Lynette Janzen talked me into it. It felt like I could just have a fling with Osler for a year while I was really married to Nutana Park. Over this last year, I even tried to set you all up with other pastors to work here but then I realized that they weren’t good enough for you. I was the only one really good enough for you and all the while I was falling in love myself. I was wooed by your intelligence, dry, witty sense of humour, and steadfast faith. I admired your work ethic and generosity in giving time and money to projects and admired our commitment to justice for others and commitment to the church despite its irritations and failings. I loved your gifts for music and passion for history. When I wasn’t in worship, I listened to the services on CD during the week and was deeply touched by people’s sharing and children’s time and the singing. Over this past year, I felt like I was become very attached through visits and everything we had been through together with the media attention around Craig and Matt’s wedding and Abe’s death. The turning point in my desire to stay on as pastor

came when I met with the children who wanted to be baptized to try to talk them into waiting until they were older. They were so eager for God and church and they are so smart and cool that I thought I want to stay long enough to baptize some them! The kids were the tipping point for me.

This past year, I often felt like I was in over my head. You all were very patient with me as I introduced you to your own relatives and had vehicle troubles on your farmyards and put my foot in my mouth a million times. You have tolerated crazy ideas for worship and have been good sports with Cow Sunday and Ida Mae Stoltzfus at the youth fundraiser last year.

Now that our interim fling is turning into a real marriage, I'm staying because like Paul's words to the Corinthians, we each have gifts to benefit each other in these next couple of years and I have the eagerness to do the job even if I may not be the perfect pastor. In Dr. Brene Brown's book *The Gift of Imperfect Parenting*, she encourages us as parents to own up to our mistakes with our children, that our children know we are imperfect so we might as well admit it and that by sharing the mistakes we've made in the past or the fears we have allows an honesty and authenticity to our authority as parents. Owning our personal stories of growing up and loving ourselves is the bravest thing we can do, for ourselves and for our children.

Authenticity embraces imperfection. One of the worst translations in the Bible is the verse, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." That's a set-up for failure for sure. The more accurate translation is Be holy as your heavenly Father is holy and holiness is associated with right living and justice not a personal unattainable sense of perfection that seems to plague our Mennonite heritage. Striving for perfection in our

homes or our children is not a healthy striving but a protection device against criticism and judgment. Perfection is not about finding God's goodness in our lives but our own efforts to avoid shame that others try to put on us or we put on ourselves. Perfection is the birthplace of shame. Shame is the belief that we are bad people. It is a harmful and false image that denies God's love for our very being. We all have shame, we get it from our religion and our upbringing but it is harmful and is the root of people's addictions to escape their self-image and is particularly dangerous for women's self-image and acceptance of our bodies and our gifts. If we are not aware of our shame and need for perfection, we will project them onto our children and continue the shame cycle in the next generations. The way to overcome shame is to love ourselves and to live in gratitude for God's love and grace despite our shortcomings. Authenticity embraces imperfection.

Our children won't respect us less for our honesty but respect us more as we show them we will accept them for who they are despite their mistakes. This doesn't mean we approve or allow all of their behaviors but it does say, we understand what you are feeling, we accept whatever you are feeling – now how can we find more helpful ways to express those feelings in our behavior. We all feel loved and belonging when our deepest selves are seen and known with acceptance and respect and that begins at home.

I'm not a parent but I am a pastor and I believe the same principles of honesty and authenticity apply at church. It may be easier for me to share about my imperfect life at church because I'm new here. No one knows my relatives and I can freely talk about them without it getting back to them. I don't feel judged about my imperfect house and garden because I don't live in Osler. No one can talk about my weeds because you all

don't see them – thank goodness. Related to pastoring, I'm not always the best listener. Sometimes I'm so busy thinking of making a joke that I don't really listen to what serious thing someone is trying to share with me. Sometimes my humour is not appropriate to the situation. Sometimes I'm impatient, I walk and talk quickly and am so busy doing stuff that I don't stop to chat. The elders at the Mennonite Nursing Home taught me to slow down somewhat but that will always be a challenge for me. I tend to go hard and then burn myself out. I left congregational ministry in Minneapolis because I was so burned out, I lost perspective and care for the congregation. I also avoided a conflict with some women, which led to exhaustion and burnout instead of facing things head on and working through things.

Now that you know all my imperfections, it's too late to change your minds because you already hired me but I trust that your energy will rise when I lack it and your experience, history, perspective and long-suffering will help my lack of it. As Paul encouraged the Corinthians so receive from the Macedonians even as they gave to them, I see us in a mutual ministry that will strengthen us and may occasionally drive us crazy with each other.

We have said in our visioning process this spring that we want to use our building for more outreach. A small step is our hospitality to the Lutheran church plant at the Osler Senior Centre for their pastor Fran Schmidt to use our youth office until we may need it again. A bigger step is our hospitality to refugees this year and MC Sask Annual Delegate Session in March. I still dream of some kind of community event in our parking lot or gym. In our visioning, we have said our children and youth and intergenerational ministry are a priority and we look for additional staffing to help us

meet those dreams. We have said we may need to look at our structure and membership requirements and we are slowly moving in those directions. I'm not actually sure where God may lead us in these next years but I trust that the ways God has led us through this last year will guide us in grace step by step into the future.

For my part in our relationship, I commit to relying on God more through my own quiet listening to God in prayer and I want to pray for you all more as well. I sometimes walk around the inside perimeter of the church when I'm anxious and pray my way through the Sunday School wing and past the front doors and past the kitchen and youth room and our fellowship hall and around through the coffee room and through the sanctuary where we worship. Sometimes I sit in the pews in the dark where you sit because you usually sit in the same spots and pray for you there, imagining you in your homes and workplaces.

I ask that you do the same for me when you think of me – pray that I may be calm and patient and understanding and wise and courageous. Pray for Patrick and I as we care for our marriage and take walks along the river and play games on our day off. Two congregations rely on us having a good marriage so pray for us. It's a long prayer list I know but we'll only make it if we are praying for each other. Let's pray through our installation litany as Carroll Epp from Mennonite Church Saskatchewan Pastoral Leadership Commission leads us...