Slings and arrows: Living with criticism

by Martin B. Copenhaver in the June 16, 2009 issue

As a boy I always had a rather sunny disposition and, for the most part, the people around me reflected back to me warm affirmation in return. My parents communicated to me in their own ways that they loved me as a son and liked me as a person. I was the child they did not plan on having, much younger than my brother and sister, so I grew up as if I had four doting parents who enjoyed my company and delighted in my accomplishments. The home in which I grew up was largely free from conflict. I cannot remember a single instance when someone in my family raised a voice in anger. I always had a close circle of friends, and although we would often tease each other, we all knew without needing to be told that for the most part it was done with affection. So I approached the world with an openness as wide and trusting as the outstretched arms of someone anticipating an embrace.

In other words, I was completely unprepared to deal with the criticism that comes with being a pastor. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. It had not occurred to me that when you approach the world with outstretched arms, sometimes you get not an embrace, but rather something more like a kick in the gut.

During my first year of seminary I served a small church in a rural corner of Connecticut. One Sunday, as I was leaving the church, an usher handed me a note that he said had been left in a pew. The envelope had my name written neatly on the front. It was small, the size that might contain a thank-you note. In fact, that was my first thought: this must be a thank-you note expressing appreciation for a sermon or a pastoral visit. So I opened the envelope immediately. On the note card someone had written: “Why don’t you cut off that beard and be the nice clean boy you were when you came here?” That was it. Nothing more. It was unsigned. I was stunned. I stood there at the back of the church, unable to move, reading that single sentence over and over. I did not want anyone to see how upset I was, so once I was able to pull my eyes away from the page I put the envelope in my pocket and

headed directly back to school.

Who could have done such a thing? And why? I concluded from the handwriting that the author was most likely an older woman. I tried to imagine her going to her desk and sitting down, taking out her stationery (perhaps the same stationery that she used for writing thank-you notes), pausing to choose just the right words to communicate what she had to say, and then scratching those words onto the paper. I pictured her looking at what she had written with satisfaction, closing the card, slipping it into the envelope and sealing it. Then I pictured her writing my name on the envelope and slipping the envelope into her purse and taking it to worship.

I wondered what she had hoped to accomplish by writing such a note. I wondered if she had any second thoughts about leaving it in the pew. I also wondered if she had any idea that it hurts to receive a note like that, particularly when you are too young to have learned how to let such things roll off your back. But most of all, I wondered who wrote it. For a number of weeks, as I led worship, I would survey the congregation with the focus of a detective trying to ferret out a criminal—which I knew was not the best posture from which to lead worship, but I could not help myself. Eventually my preoccupation with the matter faded. Sometime after that I shaved off my beard. In a sense, however, I never again would be “the nice clean boy” I once was. There is something about being the object of criticism—even about something as inconsequential as facial hair—that makes you grow up. Or at least I think that was true with me.

Nevertheless, given my personality and background, I still do not find it easy to be the object of criticism. Dozens of people may offer a word of appreciation for a sermon, but if one person offers a criticism, that is what I will remember. I will keep going back to it, as with a sore tooth that I cannot keep myself from touching with my tongue, even though it hurts each time. I have a file devoted to letters of criticism I have received over the years. When I confessed this to a colleague, she replied, “Oh, I have one of those, too. But I keep it in the back of a drawer. It’s labeled ‘Yucky.’” Most pastors are like this, and I wonder why.

Clearly this kind of response to criticism has something to do with the kind of work we do. In preaching we do more than just communicate our ideas, we share ourselves—our experiences, our feelings, our convictions, the things that mean the most to us—in ways that can make us feel extraordinarily vulnerable. Our relationships with parishioners are not like the interactions between other

professionals and their clients. Pastoral relationships are lived out in a variety of settings, usually where there is less formal structure than in relationships between, say, doctors or psychotherapists and those whom they serve. A pastor's relationship with parishioners is lived in the round. So there are more opportunities for people to expose one's weaknesses, and there are always folks around who will not hesitate to do so.

Besides, people can have unrealistically high standards for clergy as ministers and as human beings. And often people will expect incommensurate things—for example, that you will have a healthy family life and also that you always will be available to parishioners, or that you will get out to see folks in their homes and places of work and also be in the church office when someone calls. Mixed up with all of this are the ways people sometimes can project onto us their feelings about parents, other authority figures or even God. So there are many reasons why pastors are the object of criticism. And besides all that, the gospel requires that we take a stand on many matters that will not endear us to others. Sometimes when we are criticized it can feel like confirmation that we are doing our job. But those times tend to be rare. More often we feel like the unfortunate fellow with the sign "Kick Me" pinned to his back.

A number of years ago the moderator of our church told me that he had received a letter he needed to share with me. Before letting me read the letter he apologized for bringing it to my attention, but, he explained, he felt that he should at least let me see it. The unsigned, typewritten letter was from a self-described "neighbor" of mine—apparently not a member of the church. Writing to complain about the way I walked my dog, the author described the scene that prompted the letter: "The reverend stopped and shook the dog several times rather harshly. I was upset seeing this, but not inclined to do anything. Most of us seem to want to look away when bad things happen." Whoever wrote accurately described what I had been taught to do by a dog trainer as a technique for handling an alpha dog who would become dangerously aggressive at the sight of another dog. The letter writer went on to say:

> You might say, what is this compared to Bosnia and the many atrocities that are perpetuated daily. However, I think that here is an opportunity to look at a small "evil" occurrence in our own neighborhood and a need to not let it go unnoticed even if it only involves an animal. The reason for

> this is that this man is in a position where he is a leader, a model to his congregants. He more than any other person has a responsibility to emulate caring, human behavior, which he so blatantly abused.

The author of the letter concluded by saying, “I realize that it is a cop-out to remain anonymous. However, I feel that I have to live with this man in my own neighborhood, and frankly I don’t trust him.”

When I finished reading the letter, I responded with a swirl of reactions, such as: “This is so unfair! That is what I was taught to do. And I don’t even know who to explain this to.” And: “For crying out loud, only a minister would be subject to this kind of treatment. No one would write to a bank to complain about the way the branch manager walks his dog.”

Fortunately the moderator, a person with whom I have a strong working relationship, did not seem to be taking these complaints too seriously. And in truth they did not bother me all that much either. It helped that whoever took offense at my behavior was not a member of my church, and it also helped that I knew the accusations to be quite absurd. So I was able to shrug off the entire episode rather easily.

Some criticism is harder to shrug off because it might be a tad legitimate. I may have said something insensitive. Or I seemed distracted at just the moment he finally opened his heart. Or I forgot to follow up with her in a time of need. Or I neglected to thank the people who had given so much of their time. Or I made too many changes too soon in the worship service. Or I failed to take up an important social issue. The possibilities are endless. Needless to say, I take full advantage of the manifold opportunities to mess up that the ministry provides.

Because of its uncanny ability to expose one’s weaknesses, the ministry is not an easy fit for those who are particularly sensitive to criticism. But in my experience, people who are particularly well tuned in to what those around them are thinking and feeling are the ones most likely to be told, “You ought to think about going into the ministry.” Indeed, most pastors are the kind of people who care a good deal about what people think. With the exception of one dear friend, a fine pastor who grew up playing ice hockey in Detroit, most of us are not the sort of people who relish the prospect of mixing it up.

So for pastors to thrive—or even survive—in the ministry they have to figure out how to handle criticism. Here are some of the things I have learned:

Often it is not about me. I am—and need to be—a relatively safe place for people to bring their disappointment, grief or anger, even when I am not the original source of that emotion.

Sometimes it is about me. When criticism seems well founded, usually I am grateful for the chance to clarify, to apologize or to reconcile. Sometimes the voice of criticism is the voice of the Holy Spirit, speaking the truth, seeking to correct. But even when the criticism is well founded, that does not make it easy to hear. In fact, legitimate criticism may be the most difficult to hear because it cannot be easily dismissed.

I let myself value the opinions of some people more than others. One way to sort this out is to ask myself, “Would I seek out this person’s opinion?” If not, then why would I give it much weight? One minister of my acquaintance retired early because he was weighed down by his critics. Reflecting on his decision with the perspective that a bit of distance and a few years can bring, he said ruefully, “It was only when it was too late that I realized I had spent all that time listening to the wrong people.”

That is one reason why I put little stock in anonymous criticism. Does it come from a crank or from someone whose opinion I have learned to value? Since I don’t know the source, I don’t know how to assess it. Sometimes a parishioner claims to represent a large number of anonymous critics: “I know many people who feel this way.” I have learned to say, “Please tell them that I would be very willing to hear from them. But I don’t know how to evaluate opinions that are offered anonymously.” Then, too, when the criticism is anonymous, you don’t know to whom you need to apologize or with whom you need to be reconciled.

I have learned that there are times when I am better able to receive criticism (say, between 1:00 and 1:30 on Tuesday afternoon), and there are other times when it is more difficult. I relate to the experience of one pastoral colleague who says that immediately after preaching and leading worship, she feels as if she doesn’t have any skin on. Obviously, that is not the best state in which to receive criticism. So, like Scarlet O’Hara, she says to herself, “I’ll think about it tomorrow.” She has learned that by the next day she will be more rested and will have a new—even if still not thick—layer of skin, and so she will be better able to hear the criticism.

Pastors receive not only criticism, of course, but also praise. Praise can play as prominent a role as criticism does in shaping one’s ministry. In fact, for many

people, praise played a role in their initial call to ministry. After leading a worship service, a young person may be told, “Your words were so beautiful and wise. You should think about being a minister.” Or: “You are a terrific listener. Have you thought of going to seminary?”

Most ministers receive a lot of praise. In fact, pastors are frequently praised for doing things that are not all that remarkable—like showing up, for instance. As a pastor, if you just show up in the right place—say, at someone’s side during a time of need or at a school event where a young person from the church is performing—that can be enough to prompt abundant thanks and even praise. Another example: At a reception following a funeral, I was standing next to a friend, a pastor who had officiated at the service. One person who had attended the service offered lavish praise for how my friend was able to talk about the deceased “as if you knew her,” even though, as he indicated in the service, they had never met. When the person offering the praise moved on, my friend turned to me and said with a smile, “Please don’t tell anyone.” He didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t have to. As a pastor, I knew how it ended: “Please don’t tell anyone that it is just not that difficult if you ask a few questions and listen carefully.”

Everyone likes to be praised at least once in a while. But beware the pastor who needs too much praise.

When I was a young boy, my mother would hold a Christmas tea at our home for the women’s fellowship of the church. I always liked the attention that was poured over me on such occasions. Then one year—I was about five years old at the time—one of the women asked if I would sing a song. I did not have one prepared, but of course I did not let that stop me. I sang “Away in a Manger” before an audience hushed with admiration. I don’t know if I sang it well. I just know that they loved it. They were full of praise. I was proud.

The next holiday season, I was prepared. I was ready with “Away in a Manger,” and “Silent Night” would be my encore. During the Christmas tea, I walked through our home, greeting the women and waiting for the invitation to sing. I walked through those rooms many times, with the confident expectation of an angler trolling through waters that had always yielded their reward in the past. But the request never came. Why didn’t they ask me to sing? I did not know. I just knew that I missed the praise.

When I started out in ministry, I was a lot like that, wanting and needing praise. In my own way, I probably signaled my need for praise as unmistakably as the acrobat who, after finishing a maneuver, thrusts his arms high over his head, palms open, smiles to the crowd and says, “Ta-da!” I imagine that at times I received compliments with an eagerness that was a little too obvious. At other times, I probably brushed them aside with what might have seemed like an “aw shucks” humility (“Really, you think so? I wasn’t sure that I got it right”), but was in reality a pitch for more praise.

Early on I used to prize the compliments I received, as if they were glittering gifts. These days I am more likely to question their value. Now when someone says something like, “That was a wonderful sermon,” I want to hold on to their hand for an extra moment and ask, “Yes, but what did it do?” I remember one of my seminary professors saying, “We have too many preachers who want to hear their parishioners say, ‘What a great preacher we have,’ and not enough who long to hear them say, ‘What a great God we have.’” I think I’m finally getting it.

A while back I received a letter on business stationery from a parishioner I deeply respect, a soft-spoken man of sagacity and integrity. “Dear Martin,” he wrote, “As I currently struggle with the business issues related to my firm, I realize how important my faith has become to me during my time at Village Church. Hence, this is a letter to thank you for being my pastor.” He went on to enumerate the various ministries of the church that had helped him grow in his faith. “So what do these activities have to do with my faith journey?” he asked. “A great deal. Each of the activities in which I participated challenged me to reflect upon my beliefs and to have conversations with others about faith, and have caused me to more overtly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

It was a letter of praise, of course, but the object of that praise was not the parishioner’s pastor; it was God. This letter was his testimony. When I finished the letter I stared at it, not exactly reading it, for a long while before putting it down. My response was something like awe. When I got home I showed the letter to my wife. She said, “Be sure to keep this. You work your whole life to get one letter like this.” And she was right, of course. That letter has its own file in the front of the drawer, under “A Letter of Encouragement,” to be reread whenever I begin to wonder why I accepted the call to ministry or forget what it is really about.

It is something of an irony that I am not free from the need for praise in general. If, for instance, I have given a loved one a gift, I will ask without shame, “Do you like it? Do you really?” If I have just cooked a meal, after my guests have eaten a few bites I will look around the table as if to say, “Give me some love here, people!” (and if they are good friends, I might actually say it). In such times I still resemble the boy who sang “Away in a Manger” at the Christmas tea of the women’s fellowship. So why do I need, and sometimes shamelessly seek, praise for doing these things but no longer need as much praise for what I do as a pastor? The only way to assess whether a gift is a success is if the person receiving the gift likes it. There is no other criterion. If I have prepared a meal and one of my guests says, “This tastes disgusting,” I will not respond, “Well, that’s not the point,” because the other person’s pleasure is precisely the point. That is how a meal is to be judged. By contrast, in ministry the ultimate object is not to do those things that will please other people and prompt their praise, but to be both faithful and effective in carrying out one’s pastoral tasks, whether or not one is praised for doing so.

So I no longer need as much praise for what I do as a pastor. Perhaps that is because through the years I have become more confident in my gifts. But I think it is also because now I am clearer that this ministry business is not about me. More often now I feel like the cello that knows that it cannot accept much praise for a sonata. After all, I don’t create the music. I am just the instrument. Then too, now that there are more years in ministry behind me than in front of me, it no longer seems enough that people would think well of me. Not nearly enough.

I have become convinced that in the ministry it is important not to take either the criticism or the praise too seriously. In fact, that may be the only way to survive. If you take the criticism too seriously, you can feel as if you are being “nibbled to death by ducks,” as one person has put it. Or you will be only as happy as your most unhappy parishioner. Or you will avoid speaking the truth. Or you will try to please everyone, which is impossible.

If you take the praise too seriously, you may find yourself doing more of whatever brings you praise, whether or not it is what you need to do to be a faithful and effective pastor. Praise may be a fitting reward, but it is a misleading motivator. And if you take praise too seriously, you put yourself in danger of forgetting that ministry is not about you.

Not taking criticism or praise too seriously reflects a certain paradox of ministry. The ministry requires that one care deeply about God’s people, including what they think. Otherwise why would one go into this work? At the same time, the ministry requires that one not care too much about God’s people, particularly about what they think. Otherwise how could one survive in this work?

For the pastor, criticism and praise are twin impostors. Both are to be approached warily, because both can deceive and both can mislead.

So what did you think of this essay? Tell me honestly. And give me some love here.