

Creating versus consuming

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If you asked me what I wanted to do when I was a child, I would have answered that I wanted to be a writer, an artist, or a pianist. (I didn't know that pastor was an option.) I'm a person who likes to make things. Christmas decorations, gardens, prayers, photos, food, books, paintings...whatever—what the thing *is* doesn't matter much. I must be producing something.

I often meditate on that verse in Thessalonians.

Live a quiet life. Mind your own business. Work with your hands.

I think I must have been born in the wrong time. We are, for the most part, loud, nose-y, competitive consumers. Our economy moved from agricultural, to industrial, to service. Young adults work in retail. Our biggest employer is Wal-Mart. So, we make money off of money. We sell things we don't make. Or we are employed to help people buy things that we don't make. (Unless, of course, you're in the tech industry, then you're still making stuff.)

We do not grow our food from the fresh earth. We buy it at a store. We do not cook our vegetables in warm ovens. We buy French fries at a fast food drive-in. "Homemade" is something that we buy at a restaurant. It's now considered "homemade" because wasn't pre-made and frozen for the line cooks. We do not make our quilts from bits of worn cloth. We buy blankets at Target. We don't play the piano. We watch television. We feel that we cannot study art, or even make art, unless we make money from it. So even our creativity is measured by our ability to consume.

The biggest frustration I had when I was a pastor was when I couldn't find the pocket of artistic freedom in the church. My biggest joy was when I finally found it.

What do I mean by artistic freedom? It's that place where you can flourish creatively without constant criticism. It is that sweet spot in a congregation where there is just

enough freedom that people love what you create. Sometimes it's in preaching, other times it's painting in worship, creating prayer stations, or delving into music. In one congregation I served, I couldn't paint, sing, or preach much, so that's when I started writing.

I used different tricks to be able to create. Sometimes it was working with the youth. People were so happy to see teenagers loving church that they gave us great leeway liturgically. Other times, I had to claim hours outside of my job to make sure I was making stuff. But if I was not creating, if I was only administrating, reciting prayers, and copying off orders of worship with well-worn and rigid templates, I felt like something inside of me was dying. And it became soul sucking when I received criticism for something creative occurring in worship—which happened more times than I can count. I always wanted to respond, “That (hymn, song, sermon, story, painting, etc.) lasted *three minutes*. You can't be uncomfortable for *three minutes*?”

Usually, I would smile and nod. Then I would try to have compassion for the person. Because they thought of worship as an act of consumption, where it was their responsibility to criticize. They thought they had better taste as a consumer than the person creating. And that would be a very sad and difficult way to live.

But, in the end, I always tried to find that pocket of freedom for the church and for myself, even though it would have been much easier to select commentary sections for my sermon, pick out the same 12 hymns, and read the same liturgies. It's a low bar to keep the consumer content.

I kept pushing the church and myself because our congregations are one of the last and most creative places in our society. They are places where regular people can sing. We tell stories. Pastors craft sermons. We create banners. We play instruments. Children dress up for pageants. We practice art in prayer. Sometimes we dance.

You might be able to do these things at a community theater or choir, but you can certainly do them at church. And then people can watch and worship without an entrance fee. A man can sleep on the steps of the church, and then watch art unfold on Sunday morning.

It is extraordinary to hear a song reverberating off stonewalls and then dissipate into thin air. The soaring beauty of ephemeral art! Sometimes I find myself holding my breath as the soloist hits a high note or that incredibly awkward person tells his

testimony. Do we appreciate that moment? Because many of us are conductors of that symphony, curators of beauty and we don't realize the importance of our position. We must defend it. We must diligently look for those pockets of freedom.

And, of course, there is a deeper theological reason to keep pushing the borders of creativity in worship. It's Advent. We remember the incarnation and how Mary was full of God. How God invited Mary to be a co-creator of the divine. And God continually invites *us* to be co-creators. In our song, words, prayers, movements, paintings—in all the ways we create, we are God-bearers. We must never forget that.