



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Who Put You in Charge?”

Acts 4:1-13

August 27, 2017

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“Who put you in charge?”

That’s the question the authorities ask Peter and John after they arrest them.

“Who put you in charge?”

That’s the question the younger brother asks when he realizes that his older sister is his babysitter for the next three hours.

It was early Sunday morning, the day I was going to preach my very first sermon. The church had a volunteer secretary who was going through some emotional problems. She was at church that morning and she put the stack of bulletins in front of me and said, “Amy, I see you are preaching this morning. Who do you think you are to preach the word of God? Who put you in charge?” I had no reply because she had asked the very question that lurked deep inside of me.

Who am I to share with others the good news of the Gospel? Who am I to offer advice? Who am I to raise a child? Who am I to think I can make a difference in this world?

I suspect that we all ask such questions of ourselves. In fact, it’s a thing with a name.

It’s called impostor syndrome. The syndrome describes individuals who struggle to internalize their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud. The term was coined in 1978 by two clinical psychologists. Despite external evidence of their competence, those exhibiting the syndrome remain convinced that they do not deserve the success they have achieved. Proof of success is dismissed as luck, timing, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent and competent than they believe themselves to be.

Nobel Laureate Maya Angelou once said: “I have written eleven books, but each time I think, ‘Uh oh, they’re going to find out now. I’ve run a game on everybody, and they’re going to find me out.’”¹

Author Neil Gaiman struggles with imposter syndrome. He writes,

Some years ago, I was lucky enough (to be) invited to a gathering of...artists and scientists, writers and discoverers... And I felt that at any moment they would realize that I didn’t qualify to be there, among these people who had really done things.

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/220406-each-time-i-write-a-book-every-time-i-face>

On my second or third night there, I was standing at the back of the hall, while a musical entertainment happened, and I started talking to a very nice, polite, elderly gentleman about several things, including our shared first name.

And then he pointed to the hall of people, and said, “I just look at all these people, and I think, ‘What the heck am I doing here?’ They’ve made amazing things. I just went where I was sent.”

And I said, ‘Yes. But you were the first man on the moon. I think that counts for something.’² (Neil Gaiman was talking to Neil Armstrong, who evidently also suffered from imposter syndrome.)

Sometimes, imposter syndrome reveals itself in our dreams. People seem to have different versions of it, but the dream always comes down to being expected to do something we are not prepared for—usually without any clothes on, in public. In these dreams, others are finally going to learn the truth about us: that we are incompetent, that we don’t know what we are doing, that we are an imposter. Have you had such a dream?

It was my first time in the job of Pastor and head of staff. I had all of the trappings of the role. I had a large office, a really big black swivel chair, a massive desk. I even had my own private bathroom. For the first year or two or three, I kept imagining the knock on the door. Someone would come in and say “We’ve made a mistake. You don’t belong in this office. It’s time to go.” I dreaded the knock. I longed for the knock. I am familiar with imposter syndrome.

Does Peter have the syndrome? It would make sense. Think of the Peter we know from the Gospels. He’s not very impressive. He is impetuous, quick to act, slow to understand. He’s a follower, not a leader. And then Pentecost comes and he starts behaving differently. He makes inspiring speeches, he leads the other disciples. He teaches. He heals. How on earth does he pull that off?

Every morning when he wakes up, does he have to talk himself into the role he is trying to inhabit?

The day in question, Peter and John are heading to the Temple in Jerusalem when they see a man who has been lame since birth begging. Peter says “I have no gold or silver, but what I have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk!” Peter doesn’t give folks much time to celebrate the healing before he starts preaching. “I wasn’t the one who did this. It wasn’t our power at all that caused this healing. It is the power of God.”

Well, he keeps on preaching until finally he and John are arrested. Then they appear before the designated leaders of his religious tradition and community. There are priests, the captain of the temple, and other officials, and they aren’t celebrating because a man is healed. They are angry. “By what power...did you do this? Who put you in charge?” they ask. They want to see Peter and John’s credentials. It’s not their finest moment. These religious authorities sound pretty defensive. Thanks be to God you and I aren’t like that.

Two years ago I was having a conversation with a friend. She was telling me about her brother’s upcoming wedding. “Who will be officiating?” I asked. “I will,” she said. “Really?” My friend is not a minister or a judge. “How is that possible?” “I got ordained online. It took about 10 minutes.” “Oh,” was all I could think of in response.

Why did I bother with three years of graduate school, Greek and Hebrew, ordination exams, examination by numerous committees and two presbyteries, twenty-five years of on-the-job experience when all I had to do was fill out an online application? Do I sound defensive and a little angry?

²<http://neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/160603396711/hi-i-read-that-youve-dealt-with-with-impostor>

Yes, let's not be too quick to judge the authorities. We, too, value credentials, especially ones we earn ourselves. We respect credentials. We google the surgeon who is operating on our heart and we want to see degrees earned, residencies completed, a proven track record of success. We want him or her to know what they are doing.

I've been thinking. What if the religious authorities who question Peter and John's credentials also suffer from imposter syndrome? Their power and authority is neither deep nor wide. They inhabit their roles not because of their own merit. They serve at the pleasure of the Roman Empire. They have power only because Rome allows them to exercise it and it can be taken away at a moment's notice for no reason. I wonder if they wake up most mornings asking: "Is this the day that I am going to lose what little I have?"

It is no wonder that fear and defensiveness shape their actions. Peter, on the other hand, seems to have his imposter syndrome under control. How does he do it? How does he get past a sense of inadequacy? I wonder if he had a mantra, something he repeats to himself when he wakes up and when he goes out and when he tries to fill Jesus' immense shoes. He says.

It's not about me. It's not about me. It's not about me.

This is quickly followed by:

It's all about God. It's all about God. It's all about God.

A little imposter syndrome is a good thing. Because we aren't in charge of much of anything. We can't control the weather, the government, the economy, other people. I can't control other drivers on the highway with the power of my mind. (I know this because I have tried to do it.) We don't control the universe. We struggle to control ourselves. We aren't in charge of much of anything.

So, who is in charge around here? God is. We were reminded of that on Monday when the moon aligned with the sun and the temperature dropped and the cicadas stopped singing and the birds stopped chirping and we were reminded that we are but a speck in an immense and amazing universe and that we worship a pretty awesome God. Life tends to go better when we keep our role in the universe in its proper perspective.

It's all about God. It's all about God. It's all about God.

As for me, I've been a minister now for over 25 years, Pastor/Head of staff for over 15. I long ago stopped waiting for a knock on the door. But I hope I never completely get over imposter syndrome. A little bit of it is a good thing. It keeps us humble, keeps us focused on the right things, the important things. I recommend Peter's mantra.

It's not about us.

It's all about God.