

## **Be yourself – but not too much!**

: a reflection on 'self' in ministry practice

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I've just finished my 3-yearly Ministry Development Review. In the interview I said to my reviewer that what matters most to me at this stage in my ministry is to be less driven by other people's expectations and agendas and to be more fully and simply who I am. She replied:

'If I can push back on that; it's not helpful when people say 'This is just who I am, I'm just being myself, too bad if you don't like it.' as that turns the blind spots in your personality into problems for other people and ends up blocking what you can achieve in your ministry.'

Hmmm.

So, here's my issue for today. On one hand we are told 'be authentic, be yourself', and on the other hand we are told 'compensate for the things you're not so good at and don't let your strengths take over too much' ... i.e. be yourself but not too much!

On the one hand we are encouraged to stay focused on our priorities and not get sucked into saying yes to everyone and trying to meet everyone's expectations. On the other hand we are encouraged to get better at everything and to meet the national church's expectations of what competent ministry looks like.

Fair enough, I guess that's what we signed up for. Be good, be you, but keep getting better at it.

But does anyone else find this just a little bit tricky to get your head around?

I guess that most people have jobs where they have a boss, and if you're your own boss you set your own goals and expectations. We in ministry don't have a 'boss' (unless you mean The Boss with a capital T and a capital B). We're accountable to Presbytery in a rather vague kind of a way. I report to my Parish Council but I am not technically employed by them, even though it looks that way because they pay me.

In practice here's what this dilemma looks like: when I do get 'feedback' that suggests that I change some aspect of my ministry practice, how much attention do I pay to that? On the one hand I find myself deeply invested in the conceit that I might actually be able to keep everybody happy all of the time, and so part of me leaps to work out how I might address any criticism in order to please everyone. (Yeah, yeah, I know, I know!) On the other hand part of me complains (silently, or perhaps to my husband!) 'But can't they see how hard I work! Surely they can't expect even more of me, you have got to be kidding!!'

Ri-i-ight. Neither response seems particularly helpful or mature when I put it like that. I'm sure you don't react like that at all ('yeah right!').

So. How do we hold together these two realities (like twins fighting in the womb like Jacob and Esau) of being both 'who we are' in ministry and being 'always in formation' in ministry? If we do attempt to consciously and deliberately re-form some aspect of our ministry practice, and therefore how our 'self' is experienced by others ... how? and why? How - as in, what techniques or approaches assist us to become in some ways different people? Why - as in, what motivates us, drives us, and keeps us accountable in this?

Actually I do know exactly what motivates me, and I'm afraid it's another 'on two-hands' answer. On the one hand (what Paul might describe as "in the flesh"), I'm with Galadriel in the Lord of the Rings when Frodo offers her the ring of power:

"And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!"

(All right, all right, you can laugh – I'm sharing my deepest darkest secrets here!)

On the other hand ("in Christ"), I simply want to give glory to God. It's not about me at all. Both praise and criticism become increasingly irrelevant. I want to listen more fully to the living Word, and to follow my Lord more closely in everything.

In which case the question has to not be "what does the church want from me?", but rather "what does God want from me?". (It would be nice to assume that these questions might overlap but I'm not counting on it.) Thankfully we do get some guidance from scripture on the subject, and as for me and you, we have the Holy Spirit on the job.

Mainly I'm grateful. I look back at my journey in life and ministry and I can see how issues have been confronted and resolved (even if it wasn't comfy at the time). I can see how God has called and guided and occasionally shoved me into shape. I can see how I'm still the same person I was when I was a kid, but I am also a very different person, and I'm good with that. I'm not sure I quite understand all this yet but I'm good with that too.