Silly Putty Pastor
2 Corinthians 3:1-6; 4:5-12

After meeting with the good folks at Carmel and then helping guide our own Staff Parish think through what kind of Pastor would be best for Trinity, I’ve done a lot of thinking about what makes for a good pastor. I’ve given some thought to what kind of questions to ask. You can probably imagine them yourself:

- **What kind of preacher are you?** (By the way, I insisted that I was one of the top four preachers at Trinity over the last five years.)
- **What is your vision for the church?**
- **What’s your leadership style?**
- **Do you or do you not play concert Kazoo?**

It seems to me that turnabout is fair play. So instead of looking for that mythical pastor

- Who preaches exactly 10 minutes, saying all that needs to be said,
- Who condemns every kind of sin, but never offends anyone in the process,
- And who is 30 years old with 40 years of experience,

I began to ask, ‘**What would you look for in a Practically Perfect Church?**’

I figure you’d have people saying the following on a regular basis:

- We always sing one of my favorite hymns—at least once a month. It must be a miracle, since my many of my friends claim the same and their favorite hymns are different from mine!
- The body of Christ in communion isn’t always Hawaiian bread, but it’s rarely sourdough, and there’s always enough bread to remind me that I’m enjoying a feast of grace.
- The sanctuary or TLC temperature is rarely set perfectly for me, but then again, I don’t end up resenting my husband/wife for fiddling with it either.
- The other Sunday I had to park about as far away as you can to get, and had to walk forever to get to worship; I guess we must be reaching all kinds of new people for Jesus.
- The worship service runs over sometimes, but I never seem to notice when it does.
- I don’t always get to sit where I normally do—but I sometimes get to sit next to the most intriguing people--some I’d never met before.
- When no one greets me before worship, rather than getting upset, I become suspicious that I am scheduled to be the greeter that morning.
- When I suggested that in my previous church ‘we’d never done it that way before’, I was kindly told that in this church we’re willing to try anything and everything that will better help us reach the lonely and hurting with the good news of Jesus.
- The other Sunday when the choir invited the congregation to join in their anthem, I noticed that they sounded flat. Then my wife jabbed me in the ribs and I realized that it wasn’t the choir it was me.

But whether you asking about the Pastor of a church or about the church itself, the most important question to ask should be: **Does the ministry of this church result in**
changed lives? It is a tricky question, because we all know that it is God’s spirit—at work through God’s people—that changes lives. But it’s still the key question to ask.

But it’s a question that is easier to ask than to answer. What do you point to in order to prove something like that? The apostle Paul says, “Easy. Just take a look at my Corinthian congregation. See how they live and how they have grown into the likeness of Jesus. I don’t need an official letter from Peter or James or any of the 12 disciples. They are my living and breathing letter of recommendation.” Here’s what he actually says:

“Perhaps we need – as some do – official references to give to you? Or perhaps even to get from you? You are our official reference! It’s written on our hearts! Everybody can know it and read it! It’s quite plain that you are a letter from the Messiah, with us as the messengers – a letter not written with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of beating hearts.”

Now I’d love to say, “You Trinity are my living letter of recommendation,” but most of us know better than that. Not only have you had the leadership of Pastors Bryan and Lori, but many of you have sat under the teaching and preaching of Mark Dicken, Mark Fenstermacher, Lore Blinn-Gibson, and Karen Gray. Though you might not owe your spiritual growth to me, you can rest assured I owe a great deal of my spiritual growth these last five years to you. As I prepare to leave, and this is my last sermon at Trinity, I want you to know that I go forth as your letter of recommendation. I leave you a better and more faithful pastor than I was when I first came here.

I venture to guess that almost all of you have at least heard of the child’s toy, Silly Putty. Some of you might even remember this commercial.

What they don’t tell you about silly putty is that once you capture a cartoon or image on the putty there is no real way to get it off. Oh, you can stretch it and mold it until its unrecognizable, but there are always going to be little bits of Calvin and Hobbes or Big Nate showing up on that little blob of fun. You can add new images to it, but after a while they all become layered together in a squishy flesh-colored mosaic.

That’s true for us itinerant pastors as well. This morning I’d like to share just a sample of what I will carry with me for the rest of my ministry—the echoes, images and insights that I have learned from you, the good people of Trinity on Jackson. Here’s what’s going to stick to this Silly Putty Pastor.

It really doesn’t work as a motto, but at Trinity I’ve learned that you Come for the Meatloaf, but you stay for the apron. Let me explain.

Our Wednesday Nights at Trinity is a phenomenal ministry. If you’ve been, you know that the food is fantastic. (In fact, I knew Trinity was classy when my first Wednesday night I discovered real bacon being used as bacon bits for the salad bar.) We’re famous for our meatloaf but I think it’s pretty obvious that this ministry isn’t about the food. You might think it’s the fellowship around the tables, which is robust, for sure. But over the last five and half years what I’ve discovered is that it’s about followers of Jesus who have rich relationships with one another and a willingness to begin new relationships with our guests. It’s about taking turns, stepping up to feed and serve one another—those who’ve been here forever as
well as neighborhood kids, folks who come because the price is right or because they can’t afford to pay anything at all.

When everyone who is physically able, takes their turn to stand and serve, to lay out salt and pepper shakers, wipe tables, wash dishes, or stir onions into ground beef then what happens in our kitchen and fellowship hall is a kind of sacrament—a love feast laid out and served to all who will come. So much happens during that meal and so much more can take place if we continue to see it as more than a six-dollar meal, but as a way to connect with our community, with invited guests, as a witness to Christ-centered service born out of love.

There is a reason our gift to new member is an apron. This congregation has decided that the Jesus approach to getting our deepest needs met is by committing ourselves to meeting the needs of others.

And that sense of serving and giving is reflected in the incredible generosity you’ve shown over and over. As many of you know, I and our financial leaders were worried that we would not meet our budget for 2020. The pandemic has made giving different, if not more difficult. And yet we came out in the black for the year. That’s right. Believe it or not, we met our budget for 2020 with even a little to spare.

On top of that we raised $21,000 which in turn was used to negotiate away $2.1 million dollars of medical debt that our neighbors near and far had been struggling under. Did you get that figure? Your selflessness removed the chains of financial bondage to the tune of $2.1 million. How many families are breathing easier tonight because you gave we will never know, but our God most certainly does. And you have most definitely lightened the burden, touched the lives of so many others.

You can come for the meatloaf, or the fantastic music program, or the pretty good preaching, or the small groups or so on and so on, but those who stay gird themselves in an apron and follow the example of Jesus in serving others in love.

You have taught me what the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts particularly when it comes to service and generosity and care. I will always remember that Blessed People Bless People

I’m pretty sure I shared this story with some of you, but it is one of those true life experiences that has shape my vision for following Jesus for a long time. It still does.

Tony Campolo, a celebrated Christian speaker, was invited to speak at a convention in Honolulu. Because he’d flown halfway around the world, he found himself in his hotel room at 3 a.m. in the morning, wide awake and hungry. He drove around and found an all-night diner open. It was small--no booths, only stools at a counter. He ordered coffee and a doughnut and sat down. At about 3:30 the door opened and eight or nine prostitutes came in and sat down around him, filling up the stools. They were loud and boisterous, some were vulgar and a little obscene.

Especially the woman to his right. She was the loudest and she was talking to her friend about the fact that tomorrow was her birthday. Her friend says, “Big deal, it’s your birthday. What do you want, a party? Who’d throw a party for you?”
“I wasn’t asking for nothing, just talking. I’ve never had a party in my life. Just making conversation, that’s all.”

After the woman left, Campolo leans over the counter and asks the cook, “Do these women come in here every night?”

Yeah.

“Do they come in at the same time?”

Yeah. 3:30.

“How about the woman who was sitting here?” Agnes?

“Yeah, does Agnes come here every night?” Sure.

“Would it be okay if I threw her a birthday party?”

The cook smiled, yelled the information to his wife in the kitchen. That’s one of the sweetest things she’s ever heard, he tells Campolo.

“Do you mind if I come in a little early and decorate?” Fine

“Do you mind if I bring a cake?” “No!” he bellows. That’s my job. I’ll bake the cake.”

So everything was set for the next night.

The cook and his wife must have spread the word because by 3 a.m. the next morning, the diner is packed with prostitutes. At 3:30 in walks Agnes and her friend and she is flabbergasted at the decorations, at the singing, at the small, mostly used and unwrapped gifts the women brought. When they bring out the cake she starts to cry uncontrollably. No one has ever done anything like this for her in her entire life.

Unsure what to do, Campolo asks to pray for Agnes, and shortly afterward, the crowd disperses. “I didn’t know you were a preacher,” the cook says when everyone’s gone. “What kind of church are you a part of?” He asked.

“The kind of church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning.”

“Oh no you’re not,” says the cook, “No you’re not. Because if you were, I’d belong there. I’d belong to a church like that.”

The truth is I want to belong to church like that. I want to belong to a church where each and every family and individual look for the opportunity to change lives, even if only through the smallest acts of kindness and encouragement. Yes, there are a lot of things that we can only do together, but so much of our lives are lived apart. But if we have been shaped and formed into the likeness of Jesus when we are together then we are going to live like him when we go about our daily lives. Even at 3:30 in the morning.
One of the things that has always impressed me about Trinity is how many of you have found ways in your own lives to live out your faith and share God’s love. Sometimes it is through our partner ministries such as Cares mentoring, Suzanna’s Kitchen, CCS, or SPA. But more often than not it is simply by responding to human need when you come across it, wherever and whenever that is. That is something the people of Trinity do—it’s a distinguishing mark of our congregation.

I want to close this morning with an email I got in response to a sermon. It’s impressive in many ways, but in spirit it is like so many others I have received the last five years. Unexpectedly it tells of a simple desire to help a distant friend by looking in on her sister, but it turned into so much more.

A couple of weeks ago we received an email from a friend of ours. Her elderly sister’s home had been broken into. She felt helpless because she lives hundreds of miles away but was hoping we could help her sisters relocate because their neighborhood on W. Franklin St. has deteriorated over the years leaving them vulnerable and afraid.

We wanted to talk to the sisters and, if we were able, reassure them. Our first conversation revealed that they were unable to afford other housing and wanted to stay in their home.

Both sisters, living on social security and with multiple health issues, had become overwhelmed with the enormity of taking care of their property. They just needed someone to give them a boost.

Their home and property was old, yes indeed, but most problems were just surface deep. The eavestroughs needed to be cleaned, bushes trimmed and the small yard mowed and raked. Outside done—1½ hours and no financial outlay. The kitchen needed a deep cleaning and repainting to make it safe for cooking and eating — labor intensive and took a number of hours with all of us working together. $60 cleaning supplies, a can of left-over paint and LOTS of elbow grease. The women were motivated to help and probably worked harder in 10 days than they had in the last 5 years!

Other things took money. Their stove didn’t work, nor their freezer portion of their fridge. They had just thrown out a hand-me-down microwave that quit working. For just over $1,000, all were replaced. When they were delivered, they both responded, “I have never had a new range or refrigerator

The sermon this past Sunday was very timely. I have spent the summer staying home, safe from COVID, comfortable and feeling very self-centered. I got a lot of little things done around our home, content that that was all I was going to be able to do this year. When the email arrived asking for help for strangers, there wasn’t a moment's hesitation. We would help, if we could.

I have worked my bum off for the last 10 days. I’ve had to ask at least six other folks to get involved too: window replacement, electrical, gas, plumbing, fencing, tree cutting, and appliance delivery. But that’s okay because every single one of them knew they were also helping these sisters.

I was at their home yesterday and was very pleased when the older one told me they had gone through closets and found 16 winter coats to donate to Faith Mission. Perfect. They are motivated to help others, just as I have helped them. Pass It On… They have nothing new or worth anything but they have plenty that someone else might really need and they are ready to look beyond their despair. That was my reward.
No, I think that is my reward. I don’t know what else a pastor can ask for than a congregation full of women and men ready to step in and love their neighbors with the love they have for God. That’s imprinted on this silly putty pastor, along with all your other acts of Christian kindness and love. I just wanted to let you know that Sue and I will be taking all that with us as we move to Carmel. And though after the end of this month I will no longer be your pastor, I will always be your brother in Christ.

And all I ask of you now, is that you receive your new Pastor, Karen Koelsch, as graciously and patiently as you received me. I don’t even know why I ask. Because I am more than certain that you will. Amen.