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Pastor:
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Sunday, April 11, 2010

Sermon Texts: John 20: 19-31
Acts 2: 42-47
Revelation 1: 4-8

Sermon Title: "Stranglers or Wranglers?"

Sermon Topic: Two Faces of Criticism

Sermon Purpose: To teach the difference between harsh and helpful criticism.

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Sermon Prayer: Lord, may the words of my lips and the meditation of my heart be guided by your Holy Spirit and be helpful to the children of your creation. In the name, witness, and ministry of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Many years ago at the University of Wisconsin, there was an undergraduate literary club. The club consisted entirely of male students who had demonstrated outstanding talent in writing. At each meeting, one of the students would read aloud a story or an essay he had written, and then submit to the others for criticism. The criticism was **brutal**. No one held anything back. The students showed no mercy in dissecting the material line by line. The sessions were so hateful that the members called themselves "The Stranglers."

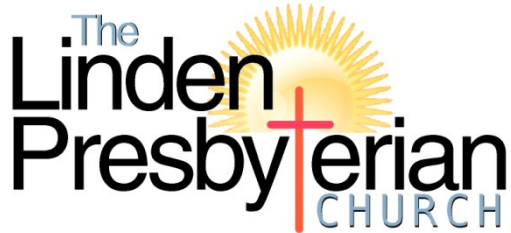
Then a similar club was formed. It was called "The Wranglers." The Wranglers were all female students also with outstanding writing abilities. Like their male counterparts they would read their writings at meetings and would critique one another. There was one, noticeable difference. The criticism of the Wranglers was gentle, thoughtful, positive, and kind. They lifted each other up and encouraged one another.

Twenty years later, a university researcher looked at the careers of the members of both groups. Not one of the bright, young talents in "The Stranglers" had achieved a literary reputation of any kind. On the other hand, "The Wranglers" had produced half a dozen prominent, successful writers. What was the difference? Both groups were very talented students. The difference was that "The Stranglers" cut each other down while "The Wranglers" lifted each other up. "The Stranglers" strangled the life out of one another. "The Wranglers" were life enhancing.¹ And then there's the church: Stranglers or Wranglers?

Ten-year-old Jessica was nervous the first Sunday she was scheduled to be the acolyte. Before the worship service began the pastor attempted to assure her that everything would be all right. As the prelude began Jessica picked up the Lucifer she would use to ignite the candles and turned to the pastor to have him light it for her. She smiled at him and said, "It's alright if I make a mistake, because

¹ *Is There Life After Stress?* James W. Moore. Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1992, p. 63.





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I'm in church."² Out of the mouths of babes, "It's alright if I make a mistake, because I'm in church." Stranglers or Wranglers?

Our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a glimpse of a church filled with Wranglers. A sense of excitement, love and purpose permeated every meeting. They ate together and worshipped together. They experienced unity, and the results were truly **amazing!** "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Wouldn't it be great to recapture the enthusiasm and the energy of that early church? Wouldn't it be great to have that same kind of love and harmony? Maybe we can. Let's look at some of the things that made the first church so alive, so powerful. How was it that they were Wranglers and not Stranglers?

We discover, first of all, that the teaching ministry of the early church was very important. After work, each evening, the believers would gather at someone's home and share a meal. They would sing hymns of praise to God for all their many blessings. And they would listen to the apostles teach.

The apostles had been **with** Jesus. It was important for this new church community to learn about Jesus. After all, he was the source of their **love** – of their **life**. Their hunger for first-hand knowledge about him was insatiable. They wanted to learn all they could. We would do well to follow their example.

The Bible is the point of reference for today's Christian. We can't listen to the Apostles teach in the flesh, but we **can read** their testimony. As we listen we, too, will be touched with the love of Jesus. We need to take the teaching ministry of the church seriously if we want the early church's love and enthusiasm.

The New Testament Church was also a praying church. They thanked God daily for all their many blessings and for the opportunity for fellowship and for the possibility to learn together. What would happen in **our** church if everyone agreed to pray daily for our church family?

Methodist Bishop Richard Wilke recalls the time he served as a pastor. He had the opportunity to worship at Windsor Village Church in Houston, Texas. He arrived early to be sure he would have a seat for the 8:00 a.m. worship service. He discovered a church that was growing through the power of prayer. Just ten years prior Windsor Village had only twenty-five (25) members. That day, it had an average attendance of **two thousand (2000)!** Between the worship services, Wilke had the opportunity to speak with some leaders of the church. They told him about the training and preparation each new member is expected to undergo. Each person is expected to pray for the ministry of the church. Each one is asked to tell the congregation what his/her ministry is going to be.

For example, in the service Wilke attended, a middle-aged man stood before the congregation and made his commitment, "I'm not able to work right now," he said, "So I'm helping with our homeless program, helping to stock the food pantry and the clothing supply for Houston's homeless."

² W. Allen Wentz. *The Upper Room* March/April 1992, p. 65.





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An elderly woman said, “My ministry is to help in the nursery. I love to care for your babies. I’ve had five of my own and eight grandchildren. I guess the Lord can use me in taking care of little ones.” A thirteen-year-old boy, recently baptized, said that he sings in the young people’s gospel choir, and is in Sunday School.

It took a while – ten or fifteen minutes - to hear from each one, but what a testimony! What a moment of victory!” And after each one spoke, something interesting happened. One of the lay leaders would call out, “Much prayer – much power! Little prayer – little power! No prayer – no power!”³ That was one of the secrets of the early church. They were fueled by prayer.

We also discover that the early church thrived because it knew how to share. “They would sell their possessions and goods,” says Luke, “and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

Some of us are uncomfortable with the idea of selling our belongings to help others. “Let’em earn it the old-fashioned way, like I did: let them **earn** it.” That’s our cry. How sad – not only for those in need, but also for ourselves.

These past few years, we have seen a tremendous outpouring of support to hurricane, flood, and earthquake victims. Many churches took special offerings to help people who lost their homes and all their belongings. Other churches sent supplies, building materials, food, and clothing. When we give of ourselves to others in need, we receive blessings we never expected. The saddest people in this world are the people who never discover the joy of giving. The church thrives when it knows how to share; when it is willing to sacrifice to help others.

The early church took their teaching ministry seriously. They were a praying church. They knew how to share. But one characteristic was more important than all the rest: **They kept their gaze fixed on Christ.**

Here was where the early church found the ultimate source of its life and its love. They kept their gaze fixed on Christ. Wrangler or Strangler? May we keep our eyes fixed on him, as well.

Let us pray:

God of love and power, God of peace and of hope; you call us into being and you enable us to serve by example and by encouragement. Guide our hearts and minds as we strive to up build believers and to nurture a congregation in truth and in love. In Jesus’ precious name, we pray. Amen.

³ *Signs and Wonders*. Richard B. Wilke, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, pp. 91-92.

