

## How Are We Doing?

Have you ever seen your job description? Some job descriptions are almost amusing as there is no possible way that you could ever fulfill everything that comes in that description. Well, at least you cannot do it every day. Some are easier than others while others expect Herculean efforts for a peasant's salary. Regardless, when you agree to work, you agree to the conditions that are in the job description.

How will our employer determine if our performance is good, better or best? Often times they will break it down by each line in the job description. The indicators are usually things such as "needs improvement," "meets the description," or "exceeds the description." If you are a teacher in Massachusetts, you know that it translates into, "unsatisfactory," "needs improvement," "proficient," or "exemplary." As teachers, we were told that the gold standard was "proficient." If you received this rating, you were all set but were still given some ways that you can improve. If you received an "unsatisfactory" you had thirty days to follow a plan to get your act together or risk termination from work. If you had a "needs improvement," you were put on an improvement plan. Oh, in case you were wondering, teacher-wise I only received proficient and did earn two exemplary ratings. The last time I got an "exemplary" I turned in my retirement papers.

Do pastors get evaluated? Yes, we do, much like the way that I described the first one. Don't worry, you don't have to evaluate me today. There are times that I feel as though there may be an unannounced or non-planned observation. One week, I looked out in the congregation here and found four retired ministers among us. I got nervous for a moment and thought that there was some sort of unannounced observation of the pastor. You will be interested to know that I did ask for feedback.

In today's gospel passage from Mark, Jesus gets a version of feedback but always figured that he was being observed. His decision to be baptized by John, just like everyone else, was greeted with "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." I guess you could say that Jesus got an "exemplary" rating that day.

Christians have a job description, if you will. Early in our service today, we renewed our baptismal vows. Those could be a basic job description for us. Do we recognize the call of God to be God's people always? This means that we don't get a break in the action. We are always God's people regardless of being at home, work, school, play, and at church. Remember, we agreed to this when we said, "I do." So, are we unsatisfactory, need improvement, proficient, or exemplary?

Do we embrace the way of Jesus in faith and ministry? In the early Christian church, it was not called Christianity, but "the Way." They called it this as the followers of Jesus showed us "the way" in which to live. How do we follow the teachings of Jesus? Do we willingly and gladly find ways to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit those in need, make a phone call, send a card? So, are we unsatisfactory, need improvement, proficient, or exemplary?

Do we accept the nurture of the Holy Spirit who renews our spirit each day? Do we allow the Holy Spirit to embrace us and to give us the strength to press ahead, even when we think we cannot? Now, some days we are not feeling well and we really cannot press ahead. Rest assured, the "job" to be a Christian comes with sick time!! But, on a day-to-day basis, do we allow ourselves to be in the Spirit's embrace? Are we unsatisfactory, need improvement, proficient, or exemplary?

By virtue of the fact that you are here or even took the time to read this sermon online, I don't think that any of us are "unsatisfactory." That would mean we have thirty days to clean up our act or get out! All of us are trying and working on being good Christians. We have a tendency to be very hard on ourselves. I implore all of us to not fall into this; don't beat yourselves up too much, please!!

Some of us may find that we "need improvement" on certain parts of our promises. We can develop our own plan to see how we are doing. January is a great time to work on that plan if we find that we need improvement.

Others of us may feel as though we are proficient. I can buy that as long as we remember that the rating of "proficient" always comes with some suggestions on how we can do even better. If we are "proficient" at Christianity we know that we can always be better.

The rating of "exemplary" means that we have a particular aspect that we can model for another Christian. Since we are evaluating ourselves, we can get caught up into thinking, "Dang, I'm GOOD. But for every aspect of all three promises?"

We've said it before and we'll say it again. We are literally practicing our faith until we get it right. It may take us a long time until we can ever get to part of a "proficient" or "exemplary" rating as Christians. The beautiful thing is that we have an "Evaluator" who loves us unconditionally, regardless of our rating. Do we really get "ratings" for being a Christian? I don't think so. But let's not stop; let's all work together to improve our "rating as a Christian" and even as a church. Can First Congregational Church of Westfield or Southwick Congregational Church be the model for another church? Only time and effort will tell.

Let us be at peace with each other.