

Read any self-help book or take any personality/inventory, and you will learn as much about what you're good at, as you will learn what you're not good at.

You know those books, they have titles like, What's your Emotional I.Q.: Assess your weaknesses and strengths in your emotions & feelings and a groom fuller personality, which is actually a real book.

And in books like this, the author will say things like, 'Okay, these are the communication techniques that you aren't good at, you should work on those so you can communicate well with people who are wired differently.'

Or, if you're a divergent thinker, that's why you never get anything done and why you procrastinate and why you miss deadlines and cant meet goals, so be more linear.

Or, if you are a linear thinker, you can't think outside the box and be creative and experimental because you're so focused on goals and deadlines, so loosen up a bit and be more divergent.

Or if you have ever done marital counseling, the counselor usually discusses with the couple, the roots of their conflicts, which often stem from different ways of understanding and interacting with the world.

And if we just stretch ourselves and learn to view situations from new angles, in ways we're not used to, we will all get along.

The point is: find your flaws and fix them.

You're an over-thinker? Simplify.

You're spontaneous? Be more methodical.

You get the point.

The problem with this, is that if we focus all our energy on our weaknesses in our efforts to become a well-rounded person, we aren't playing to our strengths.

And, I'd argue, that we are actually denying the world that which we are really good at.

When we focus on our weaknesses, we are shrinking ourselves and denying the world the fullness of who we are and the gifts God has blessed us with.

The world needs all types, the dreamers and doers, the analytics and the big-picture people, the introverts and extroverts, the spontaneous people and the planners, the emotional people who lead with their hearts and the logical/rational people who lead with their heads.

That's not to say that emotional people aren't logical or rational, but you know what I mean.

Author Marianne Williamson wrote a book called A Return to Love, about the spiritual thought system and the book has some real gems.

And among them, is this one, she says, "*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.*"

*Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.*

*We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented,
fabulous?*

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

*There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people
won't feel insecure around you.*

We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

*And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other
people permission to do the same.*

*As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically
liberates others."*

Perhaps we focus on our shortcomings in the name of being well rounded, but maybe it's because we are secretly afraid of offering the world our fullest selves.

Maybe in the past, someone has diminished the fullness of who you are, so you shrank a little bit.

Or maybe you feel like you overwhelm people, so you shrink a little bit.

Maybe you aren't sure if you are wanted or needed, you second-guess how people react around you, so you shrink a little bit.

I think that all of us who have some level of self-awareness can admit that we shrink ourselves in one way or another.

I want to fit in, I want to be unobtrusive, I don't want to offend, I want to make sure everyone is heard, I might be wrong, my idea is dumb, I can't do it, I'm too loud, I'm too quiet, etc etc etc.

And so we shrink ourselves to fit in, or we convince ourselves to behave a certain way that isn't natural to who we are, in the name of being well-rounded.

Well, here's the deal.

God wired us each in a certain way because who you are, naturally, organically, authentically, is what the world needs of you.

And our interesting character Lydia in today's story, that's what she did.

She lived into the fullness of who God created her to be- a rich, powerful, business-owning woman in an era and a culture in which women weren't powerful or business owners.

But once again, God worked in mysterious ways and as per usual, makes the people outside the gate, on the fringe of social acceptance, the center of the story.

God lead Paul and Timothy to leave Asia and go to a town called Philippi, in Macedonia, in Europe, to continue their missionary journey.

And once they get to Macedonia, Paul is speaking with some women near the river, and this woman named Lydia is eavesdropping on their conversation.

Now, Lydia believed in God, according to the text, but she probably didn't have a place in proper organized religion and she might have even been an outsider in organized society.

Yes, she was wealthy and a smart businesswoman, but she didn't have a husband, because she was the head of her household.

And she wasn't Jewish.

She was sympathetic to Judaism and she believed in one God, but she never formally converted.

So she was outside the traditional family structure and religious structure.

And this is the person God chooses to be the first European to convert to Christianity.

You heard that right.

Lydia of Thyatira, the dealer in purple cloths, is the first European to convert to Christianity.

For those of us with European roots, she's our earliest Christian predecessor.

And you know what?

She didn't become that person by shrinking or changing or focusing on her flaws or by scrounging up what she didn't have.

She owned the fact that she was good at business, she made a good living for herself, and then she used her gifts for good.

She didn't tell herself, women aren't supposed to be in commerce, I'm not supposed to make money.

I should get married and my husband will provide for us.

No, not Lydia.

She had her own household that she supported (probably consisted of slaves and such), and used the gifts that God blessed her with to perpetuate Jesus' message.

She had resources, so she told Paul and Timothy, come, stay with her.

And they did and she provided for them and offered them hospitality, which allowed them to continue their journey of spreading the Gospel message in Europe.

One thing that I think is so interesting about this story is that Jesus usually focuses his ministries on those who are living in poverty and he admonishes those who are rich and tells them to give away what they have.

But Paul doesn't do this to Lydia.

Instead, we have an example of someone with wealth using it for good.

Maybe sometimes we feel guilty for pursuing business endeavors, for chasing that dollar, but we can use our gifts, our resources, for good, for the betterment of society, for the perpetuation of the church.

The truth is that if all of us and all the predecessors of this church lived in destitute poverty, it's unlikely that the church would still be here today.

So if you have business acumen like Lydia did, don't be ashamed of it because you feel like it's not altruistic. Use it faithfully.

My friend recently asked me, "What is God's claim on your life?"

I had to think about that.

I think God's claim on each of our lives are our strengths, what we have to offer the world and making sure that we use our talents for the perpetuation of that which we believe in and are committed to.

This applies to the church too.

We know we can't be the church that is all things to everyone, just like as individuals; we can't be all things to all people.

But we do have our gifts that we have to offer the world.

After completing our Visioning conversations, we now have countless pages of notes that show us that we do certain things really well.

We know the easy ones like food and friendliness, because we do food really well and people say that we are warm, welcoming and kind to each other.

But it goes beyond that; a sense of extravagant support was conveyed.

We are really good at supporting each other through challenges, through really low times, even rock-bottom times.

And we are good at celebrating life's joys together.

We challenge each other, and we forgive each other.

I was moved by this dualistic nature that our church has- on the one hand we are welcoming and open and on the other hand, we are deeply intimate and connected, which is a tricky balance to negotiate.

And you know what else we are good at?

Serving the community, and being in relationship with the town of Burlington.

People know us for our outreach, our public service and our community events.

So, if people want a church with all the trappings, the latest technology in a place that looks like a coffee house with every bell and whistle and a whole litany of special programs offered for people of every generation.

We aren't that.

But we are a community that knows how to authentically show love to each other and the world beyond our walls.

So, just like each of us have individual, God-given gifts that we should use to help the world, I believe God is calling us, as a church, to do the same thing, to invest our energy into doing that which we do really well.

Lydia, the first European Christian, didn't focus on her weaknesses to become a successful businesswoman who was able to support the fledgling Christian church.

The church and the world don't need us to focus on our weaknesses either.

God didn't create us to shrink or diminish ourselves in the name of improving our flaws, but instead to live into the gifts that we've each been given.

May you have the courage to name what you aren't, leave it aside, trusting that someone else has the gifts that you lack,

and step into what you are and what you have to offer, that's what the world needs from you, and it's what the world needs from us, as a community of faith. Amen.