

Da Vinci's fiercest rival was Michelangelo. Their most famous competition occurred when the city council of Florence invited both artists to paint battle scenes on the city council chamber walls. They would work in the same room, on opposing walls. Da Vinci chose to paint a battle scene title *Battle of Anghiari*. Michelangelo chose the *Battle of Pisa*.

Day after day the two masters sketched and painted. Da Vinci approached his drawings scientifically and analytically. When he wanted to paint a horse, he first dissected an actual horse in order to study its muscle structure. Michelangelo, on the other hand, was much more intuitive in his approach; his drawings more free-flowing and spirited. Michelangelo approached art with freedom of expression, while da Vinci used a more classic method.

While the two men painted, crowds wandered in and out of the council chambers. It's said that spectators soon noticed the differences between the two artist's styles, choosing sides with some favoring Da Vinci's style, while others favored Michelangelo's style. One of the onlookers was a young artist named Raphael who visited the council chambers daily to learn from both men.

Sadly, you've probably never heard of Michelangelo's *Battle of Pisa* painting. The reason you've never heard of it is that Michelangelo never finished it. Partway through the competition, Michelangelo received a commission to paint at the Vatican: the Pope hired him to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo, the youthful adventurer, quit his work on *Battle of Pisa* and set out for Rome seeking fame and fortune.

Meanwhile, Da Vinci continued his work on the wall of the council chambers. His followers secretly rejoiced that he would win the competition and that the council chambers would boast one of the world's great works of art. Da Vinci's battle scene was expected to be an amazing example of the latest style of fresco painting, which is paint applied to wet plaster. The advantage to fresco painting is rich, vivid colors. The disadvantage is that it quickly deteriorates. Da Vinci knew that his *Last Supper*, painted only a few years prior, was already showing signs of deterioration. Concerned that the same thing would happen to his battle scene in Florence, Da Vinci experimented with a new form of base plaster.

At first all went well. The horses looked real. The colorful clothing seemed so vibrant. The crowd was duly impressed. But there was a problem: the newly invented plaster did not dry properly. Da Vinci asked his assistants to build a fire in the middle of the room to help the drying process. But when they lit the fires and wafted the heat toward the wet walls, the base

plaster began to melt and drip down the walls. By the time they had the fire extinguished, the entire painting was a pool of color on the floor. Da Vinci left Florence in disgrace. Da Vinci's need to win the competition, to outshine his competitors, compelled him to use substandard materials with disastrous results.

But this isn't the end of the story. The same Pope who hired Michelangelo for the Sistine Chapel also hired Da Vinci. Although not pitted directly against each other, they did compete to outdo each other in their commissions. But both Michelangelo and Da Vinci soon found themselves in an intense artistic rivalry with a third artist, also hired by the Pope: that young artist was none other than Raphael, the student of Da Vinci and Michelangelo, who would become known as the finest painter of that generation.

Nowadays, Da Vinci is best known as a scientist; Michelangelo as a sculptor; and Raphael as a painter. Each had significant gifts to use and with those talents they blessed the world. Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael never needed to compete with each other. The constant comparisons only robbed each man of the joy to be found in painting.

The Apostle Paul warns us not to compare ourselves to others: *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness* (Romans 12:3-8).

**Appreciate who you are.** Paul invites us to appreciate how each one of us is unique. We are not born equal, nor are we given equal opportunities in life. Some of us are naturally better musicians. Some of us are better athletes. Some are gifted speakers; others are gifted writers. Some of us are born in America with unlimited opportunities for education and employment, while others are born in Africa where basic survival is the name of the game. Instead of comparing yourself to others, compare you to you! How can you be and do your best today?

When the Holy Spirit distributes gifts we each receive different blends of talents, abilities and gifts. We are each unique. Paul invites us to discern the gifts God has given each of us so that

we can serve and bless each other. Our value to God is that each of us has a role and opportunity to bless the world. No two of us are alike. We can each offer our unique gifts for the service of God. When we compare ourselves to one another, we lose sight of the gifts we already have, and we lose the joy of serving.

**Seek to serve others and not work against them.** When we compare ourselves to one another, we steal from ourselves the joy of serving in our own unique ways. When we compare ourselves to one another, we steal from others the joy of serving in their unique ways. When we compare ourselves to others, we steal from God the joy of seeing all those spiritual gifts used to bless the world. Lord, keep us from comparing.

**Look for the joy.** When we compare, we despair. That competitive nastiness eats away at your insides. There's something narcissistic and icky-feeling about the competition game. Be extra loving to yourself and others instead. Make it a point to focus on the good. Judging and criticizing others and judging and criticizing yourself often go hand and hand. Be nicer to you, and to those in your life, and there's no room to pick everyone apart. Simply put, look for the joy. And pray: "Lord, keep me from comparing."

Prayer: Jesus, we confess that we frequently compare ourselves to other people. We do it usually without even thinking about it. We think, "I'm glad I'm not like that person!" or "I wish I had that guy's money," or "I wish my body looked like that." Lord, that's not your will for our lives. That's a signal that our hearts need to change. Holy Spirit, continue your work in us so that we focus on what really matters in the World, and that is our relationship with you. Lord, help us to be ever-mindful of the fact that, without you, we are nothing, but with you we are everything. Without you as the focal point in our lives, we can't do anything worthwhile; with you we can do all things. Without your grace we have nothing; but with your grace we have everything. Lord, we want to give you the credit in our hearts and with our lips. We want to glorify you always and forever. Lord, keep us from comparing. Help us to find joy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

# Keep Me From Comparing

Sunday, November 8, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Romans 12:3-8

Can I admit something a bit personally embarrassing? We pastors struggle with ego issues as much as anybody. We can get competitive over whose church is larger or is more alive or gives more money to missions. While we publicly celebrate that we are all serving the kingdom of God, we sometimes secretly smirk when our own church does something better than another pastor's church.

So, I admit: I'm secretly pleased when one of the local pastor's asks me, "How do you get so many people to come to your Wednesday Lenten services?" And I try to hide my smile when I hear people in the community say that "Federated Church is the one that feeds people." And I cheer (inwardly) when the Federated Church is recognized for doing something good in the community or when one of our members receives an award or when our name appears in the paper. Being all-too-human, sometimes it's difficult not to compare ourselves to each other. And so we must pray: "Lord, keep me from comparing!"

Mark Twain said: "Comparison is the death of joy." Yet we all do it. We look at what other people are doing or we see what someone else has and wish we could do it or have it as good as them. Or, alternatively, we scoff at what they are doing and judge them, and see ourselves as better. One makes us feel bad, the other makes us feel superior. Neither makes us happy. Comparison is the death of joy.

Perhaps the best (and saddest) example of this comes from the world of Renaissance art. Leonardo da Vinci was an amazing artist, scientist, and inventor. Today, he is known as the quintessential "Renaissance Man." Yet during his lifetime da Vinci struggled with negative thoughts and low self-esteem because he constantly compared himself to others. It's hard to believe, but it's true: the man who painted the *Mona Lisa* and the *Last Supper* doubted his own work and worth.