

Self-Compassion

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Musical Prelude

Greeting

Hymn 1: *Green p. 40* “Dark of Winter”

First Reading:

Gospel of Mark, Chapter 12, Verses 28-31

²⁸ And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

²⁹ And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

³⁰ And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

³¹ And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

Second Reading:

The Elder Statesman, a play by T.S. Eliot

Lord Claverton and his daughter, Monica, are in conversation. Monica says...

“I never remember you as other than occupied with anxieties from which you were longing to escape; now I want to see you learning to enjoy yourself.”

To which Lord Claverton replies...

“Perhaps I’ve never really enjoyed living as much as other people. At least, as they seem to do, without knowing that they enjoy it. Whereas I’ve often known that I didn’t enjoy it. Some dissatisfaction with myself, I suspect, very deep

within myself has impelled me all my life to find justification not so much to the world -- first of all to myself.

“What is this self inside us, this silent observer, severe and speechless critic, who can terrorize us and urge us on to futile activity, and in the end, judge us still more severely for the errors into which his own reproaches drive us?”

Hymn 2: Green p. 150 “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer

Dear God,

As we gather in Your Presence,
Surround us with your Loving Embrace.

Hear our concerns
Spoken and unspoken;
Our concerns that seem so hopeless,
So impossible to find our way around,
Often feeling as if a giant boulder is wedged into the
Narrow passageway that we find ourselves traveling on our life's journey.

Inspire us to see the possibilities.
Inspire us to envision new solutions,
And positive outcomes.

We ask not that you remove the boulder,
So much as to help us see the Light that shines around the boulder,
Guiding us around our burdens,
Guiding us Home.

Dear Lord, teach us to pray to you,
Not about our deepest fears,
But about our greatest hopes.

Shine the Light that is you
Into our darkest corners.

Hear, too, our Joys.
Share with us in our delight.
And through our Wonder,
And our Joy
And our Delight
Remind us of who we really are:
Extensions of --
Ambassadors of --
Your Love
And your Light.
And your Joy.

That Light, and that Love, and that Joy
That makes up
All of Who You Are
Shines also through us.

And it is through our hopes
That make our burdens lighter
And through our joys
That make our delights sweeter

That we remember our better natures.
We remember our True Essence.
We remember that we are part of Your Light.

May we shine that Light onto all we encounter in our journeys.
May we remember that they, too
Are extensions of Your Light.
May we see the Light in them
And in ourselves
Even when they --
Or we --
Are doing our best to cover it over.

And may we feel the gratitude
Of being bathed in the Light
And Love
And Joy
Of our most intimate Friend and Partner:
You.

Amen.

Children's Hymn: **Green p. 121** "In the Garden"

Message: Self-Compassion

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

And the second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

"Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." Well, that's easy, right? God is, after all, the embodiment of perfection. By definition, that is what God is! And it's easy to love perfection.

When you think back to the first time you fell in love, wasn't your beloved also the embodiment of perfection? At least for a little while? Through your rose-colored, love-blind glasses, he or she was perfect, and therefore easy to love.

Okay, so, loving God. Easy. Check.

But Jesus also implores us to "love our neighbor as ourselves." Hm. Well, ignoring one technical difficulty with that sentence, let's think about loving our neighbor. I don't know about you, but loving my neighbors is also pretty darned easy. I've got great neighbors. They lend me stuff. They chat with me. They plow out my driveway in the wintertime after the huge snowstorms. Great neighbors, pretty close to perfection. So, they're also pretty easy to love.

Puppies and babies are also easy to love. They're just so... perfect.

Except when they aren't. Except when the baby cries endlessly at 3 o'clock in the morning and you have no idea why or what to do about it and you Just. Want. To. Sleep.

Or when the puppy pees on the floor or chews your favorite slippers.

Or the neighbor blows their leaf pile onto your lawn. (Not that my neighbors ever do that. My neighbors are perfect.)

My point is, it is when kids and puppies and neighbors are less than perfect, they're harder to love.

Hm. What then? Well, then we have this idea of "unconditional love." Unconditional love says, basically, "I love you even though you're really annoying me right now. Yep. I'm going to take the higher ground and love you through all your imperfections because that's just how righteous I am. And I may feel resentful as all-get-out having to listen to the crying, or clean up the pee, or rake up the leaves, but that's okay, because I love you through it all, and I know you're going to get back to that cute, lovable stage again, and then once again you'll be easy to love."

I guess that works. Sort of. It kind of lets us ignore the messiness, the highs and lows, of life. It lets us ignore the valleys and sail right on to the next peak, when all is peachy again.

Ah, so... Love God. Check. Love the neighbors. Check.

Except for that one little technical difficulty.... that one little extra clause that Jesus stuck in there... "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Hm. As myself? What does that mean?

Does it mean I should love my neighbor at least as well as I love myself? Well, that would be really easy, because I am far from perfect, and therefore not really all that lovable. Maybe it means I should love my neighbor more than I love myself. That would be okay, too. From the outside looking in, my neighbor seems to be much more lovable than I am.

Or maybe that clause implies that a certain self-love is already in place.

Well, crap. How am I supposed to love myself? Like I said, I am far from perfect. There is always ever so much more that I could do: for my work, as a parent, as a spouse, as a daughter, as a friend, as a member my community.... Somehow or other, I always seem to come up short.

I could try to “unconditionally love” myself, but that’s really hard, too. There’s the little problem of that “inner critic” that Lord Claverton speaks of. Lord Claverton calls it “silent” and “speechless.” Well, I don’t know about the voice in your head, but mine is anything but “silent” or “speechless.” It’s loud. It’s quite specific in its criticisms. And it is constantly expressing its opinions. The darned thing never shuts up.

That inner critic makes it a heckuva lot harder to ignore those valleys in my lovability, all those times when I fail to live up to my own -- or others’ -- expectations. It makes it much more likely that I will get stuck in one of those valleys, when my love is far from unconditional, and when I couldn’t find self-love if it was standing right in front of me. Which it surely isn’t.

So, that lets me off the hook, right? I mean, if I can’t love myself, at least not all the time, at least not when I’m being selfish or short-sighted or just plain dumb, then, hey! I don’t have to love my neighbor then, either, right?

Unfortunately, I don’t think that was the intent of Jesus’ message. I really think that Jesus meant that we should find the love within ourselves for ourselves and then shine that love outward, toward our fellow man.

So, what to do?

Well, maybe the problem is with that word “Love.” It has such romantic connotations in our culture. It is that feeling we think we have when the object of our affections is oh-so-perfect.

So let us set the word “Love” aside for the moment and dwell instead on a different word: “Compassion.”

Compassion is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as “a deep awareness of the suffering of another, coupled with the wish to relieve it.”

There are three components to that definition: awareness, suffering, and something we might call “kindness” (the desire to relieve the suffering).

As it happens, compassion might be a better frame of mind for dealing with that uncooperative baby or puppy than “unconditional love” is. Unconditional love says, “I am going to love you even though you annoyed me.”

But compassion starts with awareness. It says to the baby or the puppy, “Oh, I see that you are suffering.” If the puppy knew how to control its bladder and what the protocol was for relieving itself, it would do it “correctly.” But it doesn’t know how, and it is suffering, so it does the best it can. If the baby knew how to speak and to articulate what she needs, she would tell us what she needs instead of crying. But she doesn’t know how, and she is suffering, so she does the best she can.

When we switch into that state of awareness, something happens to our annoyance. It just kind of... disappears.

Buddhism tells us that suffering is a universal human condition. And compassion toward others starts with our awareness of that suffering. And that really is the hardest part, I believe. Once we become aware that a person's actions are motivated by suffering, I think most of us automatically step into the mode of wanting to help relieve that suffering if we possibly can.

So, back to the problem of self-love. If loving ourselves is hard (especially when we "misbehave") -- just as loving a baby or a puppy is hard when they "misbehave", and just as having compassion for that baby or puppy during those low points is easier than "loving" them -- would it be easier to have compassion for ourselves?

I have found that the answer to that question is a resounding "Yes!" Just like with compassion for others, compassion for ourselves starts with awareness. Awareness of our own suffering. It requires us to get quiet for a minute -- to stuff a virtual sock into the mouth of that inner critic -- and to tune into our own suffering.

Suffering is a universal human condition. That means that I am allowed to be aware that I suffer just as much as my neighbor does. And when I suffer, I do the best I can, which isn't always perfect, isn't always what I (that is, my inner critic) or what other people expect me to do.

When I become aware of my own suffering, something mystical and magical happens. It turns out that there is another voice in my head, besides that of my Inner Critic. Hers is a quieter voice, a gentler voice, and a deeply loving and compassionate voice. A voice that has a loving smile in it. A voice that feels like the hug of angel wings.

And when I make a conscious decision to be self-compassionate, something instantly clicks, and I tune into that Voice. It's like tuning a radio dial to a different station, a station you'd almost forgotten was there, but one that has much pleasanter sounds than the static you're accustomed to hearing, the static that you'd become so used to you thought it was normal. It's like going from talk radio to a celestial choir.

I tune into that voice, and suddenly I can't hear the Inner Critic quite as well anymore, if at all. Instead, I hear the voice of Compassion. The voice of Love. The voice of Acceptance. The voice that reminds me that I am doing the best I can, and that's okay. I don't know, but it may even be the Voice of God.

And that feels incredibly good. When I first began to tune into it consistently, I was in a state of awe. I became aware that most, if not all, of the fodder for the voice of my Inner Critic came not from the criticisms of other people, as I had always assumed, but from the Inner Critic itself, projected by my ego out onto other people. It wasn't other people who were criticizing me -- or to the extent it was, it wasn't their voices that were the most persistent and the most painful

-- it was my internalization, and interpretation, and endless repetition of those voices that hurt so much.

Therefore, all my attempts to achieve perfection so that I could gain the love and acceptance of other people were now moot. It wasn't other people whom I had to please. Furthermore, I had access to this Loving, Accepting Presence simply by tuning into self-compassion. Just by tuning into it! I didn't have to do anything to get that Love. I certainly didn't have to be perfect to get it. It is always there, always present, always loving. It is the true definition of Unconditional Love: love that will not waiver, regardless of what I do; love that sees the whole picture of my life, from birth to death; love that doesn't love me despite my shortcomings, but that doesn't even see the shortcomings.

That Voice, that Love, felt so good that I realized that it was all I had ever wanted in the first place. When I thought I wanted to do or be something in order to get... something... (love? acceptance? prestige?) from the world, I was misguided. I never wanted that at all. I wanted my own love. My own compassion. And it turned out to be easier to get than I'd ever imagined, not predicated on something I needed to do or be, but on what I already was: a flawed and deeply loved child of God.

So self-compassion feels good. And if that was the end of it, that might be enough. But it turns out that that isn't the end of it.

It turns out that having self-compassion is a wellspring from which compassion for others flows.

And compassion -- whether for ourselves or others -- informs our actions, so it has practical implications. When I am critical of myself, when I internalize what I think are the expectations of all those around me, I try to be all things to all people (whether they really want me to be those things or not). I spread myself too thin. I take on too much, and I fail more often to meet my and other people's expectations.

But when I feel compassion for myself, I cut myself some slack. I realize that I am as important as -- heck, maybe even more important than -- the ridiculously high standards I hold for myself. And I find I can let things go. I can let them go from my schedule. I can let them go from my home or my garden or my refrigerator. I can release things that no longer serve me.... which helps me relax and be more pleasant to be around.

And when I feel compassion for others, I cut them some slack. I realize that they are motivated by their own suffering, and I feel compelled to do what I can to relieve their suffering. [E.g., Richard, lemonade.]

So... loving myself. Check.

Loving my neighbor. (Comes more easily after loving myself.) Check.

And loving God? Loving that Omnipresent, Omniscient Perfect Oneness of Whom -- with a slight turn of my awareness -- I can become aware at any moment I choose and allow her Love to envelop me? That's easy. Check.

Silence

Hymn 4: Green p. 154 “Be Thou Our Vision”

Benediction

May you go out into the world
And feel renewed Compassion
Toward yourself
And toward others.

May that compassion inform your actions
Making you nicer to yourself
And kinder in your thoughts and actions toward others.

And may you feel the
Loving Presence
Of God
As she Surrounds you
Embraces you
Fills you with Light
And with the only True
Unconditional Love
There is.

Announcements

Musical Postlude