

Look Back With Compassion; Look Forward With Hope. But What About Today?

Sermon 110918

I've never known quite what to make of this time of year – August into September. Kids are back in school, their summer vacation over. Yet summer's not over. Here at Restoration, our new church year has begun, our summer services done. Yet summer's not over. Even the birds seem confused. The southbound hawk migration began weeks ago; the summer symphony of finches has gotten softer and I begin to hear more of the wrens – a winter songster. But it's not even autumn yet either. And nothing's more confusing at this time of the year than my closet! If you looked in there today you'd see my Hawaiian shirts hanging next to long-sleeve pullovers, for crying out loud. Very confusing.

Yes, it's odd time of year – a season suspended out of normal time -- tipping between the last of summer's warmth and the first cold breath of winter.

Poet Nina Dringo captures this beautifully in her short poem, "September."

How lovely the world is In September.
Warm air, leaves just turning gold.
Summer still lingering; autumn coming nearer.

It is a time of bittersweet endings, and bittersweet beginnings.

It seems that every September, the world takes a deep breath,
Shakes off the August heat; Prepares for a long winter,
Knowing no one will feel this way again
Until next September.

That captures my thoughts and mood at this time of the year. Maybe you, too, find yourself being more pensive. Not the almost-melancholy of autumn, but rather a mood to reflect on oneself and the world more like an observer than an evaluator.

I must have been in that mood a few weeks ago in late August. I was riding home on the Chestnut Hill Local west line. It was about 8:30 in the evening and we had just stopped at Septa's North Philadelphia station. Now, from that stop you can look across the tracks to see Amtrak's North Broad Street station. I did. And in that instant I saw myself in the fading light of an August day in 1961, standing on the bright-lit platform. Surrounded by family, I watched the headlights of the maroon "Pennsy" locomotive drawing closer, the engine growing more massive as the Broadway Limited smoothed to a stop. As the luggage carts were loaded onto the train, I hugged my family goodbye and stepped onto the train and into my new life as a Redemptorist seminarian. I was 14. Fifty years ago almost to the day.

In the next instant I experienced a "fast-forward" of aspirations unfulfilled because of many decisions—or indecisions:

- No bishop James.
- No renowned urban anthropologist James, author of one of a standard text.
- No President/CEO of the Crime Commission, James.
- And more serious, no secure and comfortably retired James either.

Just Jim Walters, good husband, father, friend – I hope – and trusted advisor. But plenty of room for reflecting, regretting and self-recriminating, if I had a mind to.

I might have been primed for these thoughts by more than just the mood of this pause-button season. As it happens I'd also been reading about Dr. Kristin Neff's research on "self compassion." Perhaps you read about her last February in the NYT article titled, "Go Easy on Yourself ..." written by Tara Parker-Pope. In that article Parker-Pope writes:

..... [According to] new psychological research on self-compassion — how kindly people view themselves, people who find it easy to be supportive and understanding to others, it turns out, often score surprisingly low on self-compassion tests, berating themselves for perceived failures like being overweight or not exercising.

The research suggests that giving ourselves a break and accepting our imperfections may be the first step toward better health. People who score high on tests of self-compassion have less depression and anxiety, and tend to be happier and more optimistic.

We live in a society that practically screams at us to strive for more ... work harder ... be thinner ... be the best ... good isn't good enough! Don't you think it's sad how we're manipulated to consider Olympian silver medalists as losers? And my god, what about the poor shlub who came in 4th? LOSER!!! Here's a few more allegedly inspirational messages that I've either read or heard in just the last couple weeks – one of them even in a comic strip for crying out loud:

- When you reach the top, keep climbing.
- You either make dust or you eat dust.
- If you do things well, do them better. Be daring. Be first.
- Life is either a daring adventure or it's nothing!

Come on, how many ever stop to seriously consider whether their goals are truly possible, or whether they would truly bring happiness? Being at the peak, after all, is precarious. The 'alpha dog' spends an awful lot of his time and energy just to stay alpha, you know. Professor Neff believes that our society's emphasis on achievement and "self-esteem" lies at the heart of much unnecessary and counterproductive suffering. When self-esteem rests on the premise of winning in some competition with others, we are always precariously teetering on the edge, not only of losing but also of self punishment. Social comparison and competition also foster disconnection by causing us to view others as obstacles to overcome and vanquish. I'll never forget one visit Chris and I made to good friends – I'll call them Alice and Doug -- in DC at least 15 years ago. We found Doug almost crazed with anxiety around their retirement prospects. A prosperous lawyer and then managing partner of his firm, Doug's dream was to retire to a nice home on a golf course somewhere down in Georgia or thereabouts. But he was convinced that dream was slipping away. Why? Because Chris and I, and most everybody

they knew, and most of you, too, he was convinced, were going to be bidding for – and bidding up – their dream house. And he wouldn't be able to win the guaranteed inevitable bidding wars. I promised Doug that we could reduce the field of competitors by at least two – us – because that wasn't our vision. But with inconsolable conviction, Doug just said, "You say that *now*."

I suspect – I certainly hope – that Doug is a rather extreme example of an anxiety-ridden sense of a dream slipping out of reach. And I suspect that not too many people have had to cope with an unrealized dream of being a bishop– not in this crowd at least. But I also have no doubt that many, if not all, of us here today have dreams ... goals ... aspirations that time and life has put out of reach. Feeling wistfulness about that is, of course, completely normal and understandable. But there are the Dougs of the world, ridden with anger, failure, guilt and self-recrimination over "losing out" and "settling for" and researchers speculate that the tendency to choose such self-punishment is on the rise. So, to all of us, but especially to the Dougs, Dr. Neff says, "Go easy on yourself! 'Do unto yourself as you would have other do unto you'." In short, learn to practice self-compassion.

Ironically, Neff finds that people high in self-compassion tend to have higher standards, work harder and take more personal responsibility for their actions, because they can stand putting themselves through self-scrutiny without self-punishment. Self-compassion, she suggests, gently nudges you away from "striving" fueled by destructive behaviors, such as greed, or social competition and towards goals motivated by desires for greater well-being for both yourself and others.

So, how do you develop self-compassion if you don't have enough? In her book, "Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind," and on her website (www.self-compassion.org) Neff offers a wholesome menu of tips and practices for developing

self-compassion. But I'll offer just one here, today: "Self-Compassion Journaling." I'll come back to this more fully toward the end of my remarks, but at this point let me briefly quote Neff about such journaling :

Try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for [at least] one week ... write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain, shame, regret, and so forth For each event, use mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to process the event in a self-compassionate way.

As I say, I'll come back to this.

Self-compassion is a good end in its own right and needs no further justification. But let me offer another one, anyway. Only through the lens of self-compassion can you revisit your unfulfilled aspirations, old mistakes you made, or old hurts you caused and loosen the emotional grip that they might still have on you today, a grip filling you with feelings of failure, regret, inadequacy and/or guilt. And only by breaking free of those old self-confinements can you break into a new day of joy and hope for the future.

While a good end in itself, compassion by itself is incomplete. Its fulfillment lies in the decision to take some action, to remedy the pain, suffering or injustice. It's pretty easy to understand how this works: Hurricane Katrina devastates the Gulf Coast. We're moved by the stories and pictures of shattered lives. We can imagine what it would mean to ourselves and our own lives if we were facing similar devastation. And we're moved to do something to make their lives even a little better as we're able. Maybe all one person can do is pray. But another is able to donate to relief funds. And yet some others are so moved that they readjust their own lives to go down there and lend their hands to the rebuilding. Few do nothing. Yes, we do have a great capacity for such compassion and compassionate action. So what is the action that flows – or should flow – from feelings of compassion when the focus, the subject, of our compassion is ourselves? The action of forgiveness -- Self Forgiveness. Then

why is it so often so hard for so many of us to show such compassion for ourselves and forgive ourselves? Isn't it because while on the one hand forgiving another person for wronging me can seem virtuous, even saintly, forgiving oneself for wrongs and failures seems self-indulgent, cheating, an attempt to feel good about oneself that betrays yet another failure, namely failure to accept responsibility? And at a deeper level, doesn't it indicate at least a doubt that we're worthy of forgiveness?

Look, life is tough, and despite the very best intentions of good people, things go wrong, sometimes very wrong and things fall apart. Most Americans get married full of love, hope, optimism and commitment, yet around 40% of first marriages end in divorce. Mine was one of them. Things fall apart. We launch into adult lives of career and family full of optimistic aspirations. But things happen and we end up struggling to meet the demands of daily life only to find ourselves needing care for life-stress related problems, or even worse fall into depression that makes a shamble of our job. Things fall apart. Instead of accepting and taking comfort in that inescapable truth, we seem to be convinced that we should be "... master of my fatecaptain of my soul." And so, we beat ourselves up for falling short. Well, if you prefer to take your cue from someone, forget William Ernest Henley the poet, and embrace the wisdom from the Dalai Lama who says:

[Compassion] is the state of wishing that the object of our compassion be free of suffering Yourself first; then in a more advanced way that aspiration will embrace others ... Yourself first."

You know, being kind to yourself is actually the most natural way – the way in harmony with our natural selves. If we cut a finger and find ourselves bleeding and in pain, what is that we want? What is it that we do? Easy: we put on a band-aid to stop the bleeding and take a pill to stop the pain. We don't give a second of thought to making our physical pain stop. That's our Healer/Lover-self taking charge. But how many of us then say something in all seriousness like, "What a klutz I am Or what a dope I am Or how stupid I am for doing

that!” And just like that we’ve acted out the belief that we don’t really deserve to be free of pain – we just trade the physical pain for inner pain. That’s our Judger-self having the final word and trumping our Healer/Lover-self. So, how do we do less self-beating and more self-forgiving?

The first step towards changing the way to treat yourself is to notice when and how you are being self-critical. Whenever you’re feeling bad about something, try to notice what you’ve just said to yourself. What words do you actually use when you’re self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, angry? You want to be able to get to know your Judger-self very well, and to become aware of when he (or she) is active. For instance, if you’ve just eaten half a tray of brownies – and I know I could, if I let myself --- does your Judger-self say something like “you weak-willed fat pig, you make me sick,” and so on? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself. Then consciously soften the self-critical voice, but do so with compassion rather than yet another level of self-judgment.

Self-compassion journaling will be very helpful with this, if you’re willing to give it a try. So, it works like this:

- ***Connect first to Mindfulness.*** Bring into your awareness the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and non-judgmental of your experience, not belittling it nor making it overly dramatic. (For example, “I was frustrated because she was being so slow. I got angry, over-reacted, and felt foolish afterwards.”)
- ***Connect then to Common Humanity.*** Write down the ways in which your experience was connected to the larger human experience. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect, and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. (“Everyone over-reacts sometimes, it’s only human.”) You might also want to think about the various causes and conditions underlying the painful event. (“My

frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was late for my doctor's appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different my reaction probably would have been different.")

Finally, *connect to self-kindness*, giving voice to what I call your Guiding-self and let him (or her) speak more constructively to you. Speak it or write it from the viewpoint of a kind friend comforting you, if that helps. (Something like: It's okay. You messed up but it wasn't the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it.) For myself I'm partial to Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer":

Spirit of Life and Hope, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

The beauty of the Serenity Prayer is that it puts you in the correct posture for the final step in self-forgiveness, namely compassionate action. But be clear about what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting, nor as condoning. Try seeing this perspective: you're releasing your feelings of hurt, or anger, or shame, or guilt for your own sake, for the sake of your children and loved ones, because when you do release them, more of your joy and creativity can be present. Thus, the serenity prayer does remind us to have courage and do our best to avoid repeating whatever it was – is – that triggered the self-recrimination. But it also reminds us, implicitly at least, that to err is human. So, learn the serenity prayer, or your version of it, by heart because you'll be repeating it often.

[Congregation chuckled.]

Now that chuckle, my friends, that chuckle -- not harsh self-talk -- is really the right response to our stumbles. In that chuckle you simultaneously acknowledge the tragi-comedy of being human and the hope of doing better. It's what poet and author C. Joybell C. is resonating to when she writes:

"There is some kind of a sweet innocence in being human -- in not having to be just happy or just sad; not just good or not just bad -- in the nature of being able to be both broken and whole, at the same time."

But for my money nobody's captured the truth of us better than, and I leave you with the wisdom of, Josh Billings who says of us:

"Every man has his faults and follies -- often they're the most interesting thing he's got."

Blessed ... and hopeful ... and easy on yourself be!

Now please join us in lifting up a litany of hope.

REFERENCES

"Don't Be So Hard on Yourself: Self-Compassion Facilitates Creative Originality Among Self-Judgmental Individuals" Darya L. Zabelina & Michael D. Robinson. *Creativity Research Journal*. Vol22:3, pages 288-293.