**Coping With Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox**

**Philippians 4:4-9**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

May 24, 2020

Everyone seems to have an opinion these days about how we should spend our time while we shelter in place.  Have you noticed this?  For example, scrolling through Facebook, you see a post that says, “Shakespeare wrote “King Lear” while he was in quarantine.  What are you doing?” or “Isaac Newton created calculus while staying at home during the plague.  So what about you?”  There seems to be a lot of pressure out there to do something impressive - write a novel, train for a marathon, learn a new language - and I suppose some people are able to do that and thrive in the process.  I’m sure there are people who can deal with all this pandemic stress and anxiety by focusing on being productive. But, I’m also sure there are people who can’t.

In fact, I suspect that for a lot of us, the pressure to accomplish something impressive just adds to the anxiety and emotional challenges of this time.  The suggestion that we should somehow be able to do more, be more productive, or learn something new because we are sheltering in place just leaves us feeling guilty - and more anxious.  Our inner dialogue goes something like, “What’s wrong with me.  Everybody else is taking advantage of time at home.  I’m just too lazy and unmotivated.”

But, that’s so unfair. After all, it’s hard enough just to manage the basics of life right now.  In addition to worrying about the virus itself, there are a host of other challenges facing us right now - learning a whole new way to work, trying to home school children plus work and keep a household going, working in a hospital or clinic with Covid-19 patients, or trying to survive financially after being laid off. No wonder so many of us feel overwhelmed and exhausted.  How can we shift from self-judgment to self-compassion?

Two weeks ago we started a sermon series called “Coping with Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox”.  We started with talking about living in uncertainty and then last week we focused on naming our losses and facing our grief.  This week, I’d like to explore what might be the most helpful gift we can give to ourselves during this time - nurturing self-compassion.

 It’s not surprising that we feel pressure to be productive during this time.  In a recent article in The Guardian, Kiran Misra writes, “We live in a political and social climate where our sense of self-worth is often reduced to our productivity.”  In other words, our society values people who do and succeed.  We idolize the self-made individual who worked their way from rags to riches.  We glorify working 14-hour days and never taking a vacation. And so, whenever we feel we’re doing less than we could be, that we’re not living up to expectations or failing to be highly productive, we get very hard on ourselves - judging ourselves for being lazy or unmotivated.

Realistically, though, the idea that we should be living through a global pandemic and remain as productive, if not more so, is just not reasonable.  The symptoms of anxiety - lack of focus and concentration, increased fatigue, moodiness, and sleeplessness - all impact how we function in working, parenting, even learning something new.

So, with our self-worth tied to our productivity, how do we give ourselves permission to slow down, re-focus, and replace criticism with compassion?

According to the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, “Having compassion for oneself is really no different than having compassion for others...First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore that homeless person on the street, you can’t feel compassion for how difficult his or her life may be. Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others’ suffering so that your heart responds to their pain (the word compassion literally means to “suffer with”). When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity), it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection are part of the shared human experience.”

These are all steps we can put in place in caring for ourselves as well.  We can notice our own suffering, allow ourselves to feel moved by it, consider what would help, offer ourselves understanding rather than judgment, and recognize that what we are feeling is a common human response to the crazy time in which we live.

What does this look like in practice?  You can choose to do something kind for yourself every day during this time.  Speak kindly to yourself rather than critically.  Celebrate your small successes (and that may just be getting out of bed in the morning!).  Create healthy boundaries around your life and heart.  Limit time you spend with people and situations that make you feel bad - especially bad about yourself.  Develop a sleep routine. Eat healthfully.  Spend time out of doors.  Do something creative.  Spend time with people who love and affirm you.

Now, just in case you’re thinking this is a lot of psychology and not much Christianity, let’s explore - is there a theological or biblical grounding for self-compassion?

As with everything, let’s start with Jesus.  If we think about Jesus and his ministry as a whole we realize it had to have been exhausting.  For three years, he traveled on foot from place to place all around Judea carrying with him a message he believed was transformational.  He taught thousands of people at a time.  He healed people of all sorts of physical, mental, and spiritual diseases.  He stood up against the powers and principalities of his time to advocate for the poor and oppressed.  He poured himself out for others - his love, his compassion, his energy, his hope - day after day.

Yet, he also knew when to stop.  Over and over again, we see Jesus withdraw from the crowds, and even from his disciples, so he could be alone to rest and pray.  He recognized his own need for boundaries - a break from the people and the pressures of his work - and his need for renewal and time spent with God.  As a Jew, he would have been raised with the practice of Sabbath and with the deep awareness that what God seeks for us is whatever is life-giving and affirming rather than depleting and judgmental.  Jesus models for us what it looks like to offer ourselves the care and compassion we need in order to bring our best selves into the world.

And the result is not only a release from anxiety and pressure but also a deeper sense of joy.  That is what we find in today’s scripture passage from Philippians.  It is important to remember that Paul wrote Philippians from a Roman prison where, of course, he faced stressors that we can only imagine these two thousand years later - including the possibility of execution.  From his prison cell, he wrote to the church in Philippi, which had stressors of its own - both a conflict between its leaders and the harassment and persecution that many early churches faced in the first centuries after Christ’s death.

In the midst of all of this, what does Paul say?  **“**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

In fact, joy is a theme throughout the letter and, according to Paul, joy comes from the assurance that God is at work in our world.  We can be gentle and kind, filled with the peace of God, because God is greater than what we fear, stronger than our anxiety.  Paul goes on to say that our task is to focus not on our weaknesses or our mistakes but instead on “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things...And the God of peace will be with you.”  Paul teaches the Philippians how to be compassionate with themselves by affirming their best qualities rather than criticizing their faults.

There are many spiritual practices that can help us to move from self-judgment to affirmation and joy.  Shonagh Taruza has put together a great video of exercises that lead you into compassion for yourself and others.  You can find it on the church’s Facebook page.  Shonagh will also lead our Thursday evening Zoom session where we can practice together.

You know, I’m really grateful that Shakespeare wrote “King Lear” and Newton created calculus during the plague.  Obviously, they are incredible gifts to humankind.  So, of course, if you are a person who finds joy and renewal in trying something new, I encourage you to go for it.  But, for the rest of us, it’s okay to slow down and to care for ourselves during this time.  It’s okay to offer ourselves the compassion we would offer a friend.  And it’s okay to seek the peace of God that transcends all understanding and turn our hearts toward joy.

May it be so. Amen.