

Pillars of Joy: Acceptance

Matthew 5:38-48

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April 25, 2021

I don't know about you, but I am becoming more and more aware of people's pandemic fatigue – including my own. This latest surge seems to have been a sort of last straw for a lot of folks. People are done. They want their lives back.

Where I see the fatigue most visibly is in people's moods and attitudes – again, including my own. Talking with friends and colleagues, they say they've noticed the same thing. People are crabby, irritable, more likely to assume the worst of others instead of the best, less likely to edit themselves and hold back unkindnesses. They seem to be more judgmental and have less patience which leads to more drama and less grace.

Have you noticed this, too? In yourself? Your family? Colleagues at work? The parents of your kids' friends? Of course, it's not surprising. It's been more than a year now, and every time we seem to be moving in the right direction, Covid cases go up and life seems to be on hold again. From early on we've known that the pandemic was having a huge impact on mental health. As time passes without relief from depression, anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation, it's bound to take its toll.

So, is there an antidote to this? This is the third week of our sermon series based on *The Book Of Joy* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We have been focusing on the pillars of joy – eight qualities which can lead us to deeper joy even in the midst of crisis or suffering. One of the pillars that seems most helpful during this time to me is that of acceptance - “the ability to accept our life in all its pain, imperfection, and beauty”.

Douglas Abrams, the author who worked with the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama to write *The Book of Joy*, is quick to point out that acceptance does not mean resignation or defeat. In fact, just the opposite - there is great power in acceptance. Acceptance, Abrams says, “allows us to engage with life on its own terms rather than rail against the fact that life is not as we would wish...So many of the causes of suffering come from our reacting to the people, places, things and circumstances in our lives rather than accepting them. When we react we stay locked in judgment and criticism, anxiety and despair, even denial and addiction”.

Acceptance is a pillar of joy because it changes our focus from anger, frustration, or disappointment to compassion and the freedom to move forward and create change. “We are meant to live in joy,” the Archbishop says, “This does not mean life will be easy or painless. It means that we can turn our faces to the wind and accept that this is the storm we must pass through. We cannot succeed by denying what exists. The acceptance of reality is the only place from which change can begin.”

Of course, this applies in so many areas of our lives. When an alcoholic accepts that his drinking is out of control, he can focus on getting sober. When someone accepts their marriage is over, they can think more clearly about what life might look like in the future. When a person can accept they lost their job, they can discern what their next step might be.

Acceptance can change our feelings about others, as well. For example, when we accept that living through a pandemic is just plain hard, we are more likely to be compassionate with ourselves and with each other.

The Dalai Lama likens this kind of acceptance to how you might manage living next to a difficult neighbor. “You can judge and criticize them”, he says. “You can live in anxiety and despair that you will never have a good relationship with them. You can deny the problem or pretend that you do not have a difficult relationship with your neighbor. None of these is very helpful. Instead you can accept that your relationship with your neighbor is difficult and that you would like to improve it. You cannot control your neighbor, but you do have some control over your thoughts and feelings. Instead of anger, instead of hatred, instead of fear, you can cultivate compassion for them, you can cultivate kindness toward them, and you can cultivate warmheartedness toward them. In time, maybe the relationship will become less difficult. Maybe not. This you cannot control, but you will have your peace of mind whether your neighbor becomes less difficult or not.”

Yet, accepting the reality of our lives can have a much broader impact, as well. This same kind of acceptance can spark change at a societal level. Archbishop Tutu’s work in South Africa makes for an excellent example of this. He did not accept that apartheid was inevitable, but he did accept its reality. Rather than denying or turning his back to it, rather than pointing fingers of blame, he accepted the reality of apartheid and its impact on his people, and that empowered him to create change. Similarly, with the movement in our country to finally address racism, when we accept that systemic racism exists, we can begin to dismantle it.

Of course, Jesus teaches something very similar in Matthew 5. This is a really challenging scripture passage to which people seem to have one of two reactions. Either they read Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek or walk the second mile as nearly impossible. After all, how can we be perfect like God is perfect? Or they see it unacceptable because it seems to tell people to passively submit to mistreatment.

Yet, neither of those are what Jesus is trying to communicate. Rather, he is saying there is power in acceptance. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

In each of these situations, one person has more power than the other - the one who slaps, the one who sues, and the one who forces. What Jesus is teaching to the Jews living under the sometimes brutal authority of the Roman Empire is non-violent resistance. In each case, Jesus teaches that when you accept that people are imperfect and systems are unjust, then you can learn not to react to them. And when you don’t react to them, two things happen. One, you take away the power of the “enemy” to manipulate your emotions - to make you feel lesser or weak or subservient or hopeless. And two, you feel more powerful and more able to influence change.

Over the last week, I’ve had the joy of reading Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Stride Toward Freedom”, which is his own account of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. Once again, I was awed by his vision of creating change by teaching people the power of non-violence. When

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man one December day in 1955, the door opened for the African-American community to claim its power and begin to dismantle segregation. Yet, when the movement was just starting, King says the first great hurdle was inspiring the community to action. So long oppressed by slavery and then segregation, many had become either apathetic or passive. King and his colleagues helped them to open their eyes to the reality in which they were living as well as the potential for change. He showed them how through nonviolent resistance they could not only take away power from the white community in Montgomery but also grow in self-respect and hope as they responded to hate with love.

The start of any change is the eyes wide open acceptance of the ways things are - the willingness to be honest with oneself, to see clearly the circumstance, the struggle, the impediments without denying or railing against them. Whether individually or collectively, when we accept where we are, we can then move forward.

But, how do we get to that place? There are many starting places, of course, but meditation is one that comes out of both Buddhist and Christian traditions. Douglas Abrams points out that “meditative practice allows us to quiet the distracting thoughts and feelings so that we can perceive reality and respond to it more skillfully”. Meditation, and I would add prayer, helps us to be in the moment with a clear head and heart and the strength to accept the challenge, pain, and potential of everyday life.

To that end, we’re going to do something a little different to end this sermon. Whether you find yourself edgy or discouraged because of the pandemic or anxious and frustrated about something in your own life or that is happening in the world, I’d like to invite you to join me right now as I lead us through a few moments of meditation.