

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2024

Help Yourself? Help Others.

Andy Jones

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

—John 3:16

I can't hear these words, or see that biblical citation without thinking about Rainbow Hair Man. In the late 80s and 90s, Rainbow Hair Man somehow managed to get himself on camera at, what felt like, every major sports event I watched on TV. There he was, sporting a rainbow-colored afro, holding a sign that read: *John 3:16*. I couldn't see him and his sign without feeling judged. ...

... so that everyone who believes in him ...

Did I believe? Did I believe enough? Was I, in this strange made-for-TV moment, being called out and found wanting?

Now, I know that this passage has been used in just that way, to interrogate and judge people's belief in God and in Jesus, and I know that this passage, because it has been used in this way, can get some people's hackles up. That said, I think my response to Rainbow Hair Man, and his ever-present sign, had more to do with my own orientation toward the world than it did with the message itself, or even with its history of misuse.

Here's the next line from John's Gospel, John 3:17:

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

If we take the two verses as a whole, we see that God gave God's only Son, not as a means for evaluating our lives, but as the key to something more wonderful than we could ever imagine: eternal



Monday, March 11, 2024

Forgiving Ourselves

*What a gift to me, and to the people around me
... both to experience the gift of forgiveness for
myself and, in turn, to learn to forgive others.*

—Andy Jones

Yesterday Andy Jones candidly shared his personal struggle many years ago with self-criticism. He wrote, “My belief that the world is a judgmental, harsh, and unforgiving place drove me to a self-destructive perfectionism that left me ashamed and depressed. It made me judgmental, harsh, and unforgiving of the people around me. ...”

This week our focus will be practicing forgiveness toward ourselves. Andy’s reflection highlights one reason this is so important as he explained that he found himself judging others with the same harsh judgment he felt toward himself. As he came to understand that God was loving and not condemning, he moved to a place of compassion for himself that then allowed him to offer the gift of compassion and forgiveness to others.

We often hear people say that it is much easier to offer love and forgiveness to others than it is to offer that same love and forgiveness to themselves. Last week we learned that forgiveness is a choice and now we hope that our reflections this week will help us all to choose to forgive ourselves when we have fallen short. And then, looking ahead to next week, we will soon discover what Andy Jones discovered: there is a deep connection between forgiving ourselves and forgiving others.

Making it Personal: What initial thoughts do you have about practicing compassion and forgiveness toward yourself? In general, are you compassionate toward yourself, or do you tend to be overly self-critical? How does your faith guide you in practicing self-acceptance?

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

A New Path of Promise and Possibility

Although you should not erase your responsibility for the past, when you make the past your jailer, you destroy your future. It is such a great moment of liberation when you learn to forgive yourself, let the burden go, and walk out into a new path of promise and possibility.

—John O'Donohue

In our experience, there are two different ways many people have trouble forgiving themselves. The first has to do with something specific a person has done for which they are having trouble forgiving themselves. Quite often they feel deep regret about how they have hurt or betrayed someone, or how they have betrayed a core value within themselves.

A second way we have found that people seeking forgiveness experience difficulty is more general in nature. These people usually can't identify anything specific they feel bad about having done, but live with a pervasive and chronic sense of not feeling good enough, a sense that they have just never quite measured up to some internal or external standard. Further exploration usually reveals that this sense of not being good enough is related to their having internalized this message growing up, whether in their home or from the surrounding environment and culture in which they lived.

No matter the origin of the need to forgive ourselves, the path to healing is the same. First, we need to acknowledge both to God and, if possible, to someone else we trust, the real pain of not feeling worthy and of our need to forgive ourselves. Opening our hearts, to God and to another, in this way creates an opening in which we can receive God's compassion and mercy. It allows us to begin to "let the burden go, and walk out into a new path of promise and possibility."

Making it Personal: Have you ever felt your past was a "jailer" that prevents you from being free to enjoy your life in the present? Do you currently experience difficulty in forgiving yourself in either way described above? If so, what has helped or what will help you to forgive yourself?



Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Contemplative Practice: The Examen

True forgiveness is never dishonest. It is not some futile exercise in rosy self-deception. ... It is simply the gift we give ourselves that allows us to live in the present and be as God created us.

—Hugh Prather

This week we invite you to work with the Ignatian-inspired practice of the Examen*. As we work with forgiving ourselves this week, we have found the Examen to be a powerful, compassionate practice we can use to more clearly identify what might be getting in our way of forgiving ourselves.

The Examen is simply a way of paying attention, of listening to ourselves and to God at the end of the day. When we apply this process, noting times during the day when we found ourselves being our own worst critic, it can help us recognize thought patterns and habits that might be sabotaging our ability to forgive ourselves. We can ask for God's help, and this act of asking is a reminder that we are never alone, in our struggles, or in our successes. (Of course, if you ever find yourself truly stuck, by all means seek professional help from a pastor or therapist or both.)

The key is paying attention to all of our emotions, noticing times that we were hard on ourselves, as well as those moments where we were able to extend self-compassion and kindness. When we feel complete with the process, we then give every part of our day to God to hold for us as we rest. Then, as Hugh Prather wrote, we are free to “live in the present and be as God created us.”

Making it Personal: If you engaged with this practice, were you surprised by anything that came up? Did you discover ways you both support yourself and get in your own way? Were there any new insights, guidance, or inspiration you want to carry forward with you?

**We've included two versions of the Examen to consider on pp. 85–86.*

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Progress Not Perfection

Embrace being perfectly imperfect. Learn from your mistakes and forgive yourself, you'll be happier.

—Roy Bennett, *The Light in the Heart*

I (Scott) struggled with perfectionism for much of the first half of my life. It started early in school and carried over into youth sports, and then into my young adult life. I attached my self-worth to achievement and thought that the more perfect I was the more I would be loved.

I learned in midlife that perfectionism is rooted in a lack of self-love and that as a child of God I am already loved for simply being who I am. I don't need to earn that love and acceptance, and I can't do anything to lose it. This is the lesson the Prodigal Son learned when he returned home after having squandered everything his father had given him.

Social media has many wonderful aspects to it, but one downside is that it can fool us into thinking that other peoples' lives are perfect, or at least that they are happier and more successful than we are. If we are not careful, the constant and unrealistic comparison of our "insides" to the "outside images" from the lives of others can fuel perfectionism in ourselves.

The advice Roy Bennett offers in the quote is the perfect prescription for one healthy way to embrace our imperfect selves: "Embrace being perfectly imperfect. Learn from your mistakes and forgive yourselves, you'll be much happier." I know the truth of this myself as I have been much happier ever since I embraced that I am, and always will be, perfectly imperfect.

Making it Personal: Have you ever struggled with perfectionism? Do you find yourself comparing your life to the lives of others and feeling that some aspect of your life is not quite good enough? What helps you if or when you struggle with perfectionism, or comparing yourself to others?



Friday, March 15, 2024

Forgive Your Neighbor as You Forgive Yourself

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

—Matthew 22:39

A core teaching of our Christian faith is Jesus' teaching to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The meaning of this is clear: we are to love others as much, if not more, than ourselves. Everyone is equal in God's eyes, and we are to honor the dignity and worth of every person by loving them as we love ourselves.

This teaching has a second meaning relevant to our focus this week on forgiving ourselves. From a psychological perspective, there is a strong connection between how we treat ourselves and how we treat others. If we are excessively critical of ourselves, we likely are that way toward others. If we are patient and compassionate with ourselves, we are likely that way with others, too.

Posting on her Facebook page in 2014, spiritual author Anne Lamott shared a realization of how judgmental and resentful she could be toward other parents when she was a young mother.

It took a lot of work to stick with the unpacking of the resentment to realize that it was always about self-loathing—most of these people in the trajectory of the drones I fired were pretty innocent bystanders. The lack of forgiveness had to do with really bad old feelings I had about myself. The others were just conveniently annoying.

As we learn to increase our capacity to forgive ourselves, we will likely notice that we become more forgiving of our neighbor, as well.

Making it Personal: What do you think about the connection between forgiving ourselves and forgiving others? Have you found the way you practice forgiveness of yourself similar to how you practice it toward your neighbor?

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Listening to the Whispers

The reasons for forgiving ourselves are the same as for forgiving others. It is how we become free of the past. It is how we heal and grow. It is how we make meaning out of our suffering, restore our self-esteem, and tell a new story of who we are. If forgiving others leads to an external peace, forgiving ourselves leads to an internal peace.

—Desmond and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*

We pause again here to notice and integrate what we have experienced during the past week as we focused on the importance of making time and space in our lives for practicing self-acceptance and forgiveness toward ourselves.

A core saying, expressed throughout our Living Compass wellness programs, is that “you cannot pour from an empty cup.” When we fail to practice regular self-care and renewal, our spiritual and emotional cups soon become empty, and we have little to share with others. This is true when it comes to forgiveness, as well. We will find it hard to offer forgiveness and acceptance to others if we are not regularly practicing forgiveness and acceptance toward ourselves.

The quote from Desmond and Mpho Tutu is a perfect summary of what we have been reflecting on this week. Read it again slowly, and then reflect on what it is speaking to you as you engage with the questions in the “Making It Personal” section.

Making it Personal: As you reread the quote, what stands out for you? As you think about your current practice of self-care and self-compassion and the relative fullness of your cup, are you hearing any whispers? Is there anything different you want to do as you respond to what you are sensing?
