

## *Forgiving All the Disappointments*

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By The Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on November 14, 2021**

You may remember that last Sunday I talked about forgiveness, our theme for the month of November. Last month we took on the theme of healing. My introduction of these themes has been intentional as we move toward a new year. It's important for us to forgo resolutions and move toward healing and forgiveness as we enter a time of renewal. We continue the theme of forgiveness this morning, but I want to specifically talk about forgiving ourselves, forgiving ourselves for all the perceived disappointment. In her poem, *Wild Geese*, the poet Mary Oliver wrote, "You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Mary Oliver's thoughtful lines refer to a feeling about ourselves when we aren't what we think we should be, a self-criticism that, we presume, demands repentance, rather than acceptance. Part of what leads us to think we are unacceptable is comparing ourselves to others who are "better" – and there are always examples. These are our disappointments

Disappointments can be quite painful, regardless of their magnitude. A friend recently terminated a long-term relationship in which she'd struggled for decades. Harsh words, bitter memories, and daily friction had taken their toll. "I've never felt the emotional closeness I hear other couples describe," she explained. Hopes of deep satisfaction became a tarnished nightmare, and broken dreams prompted her to end the relationship. Another friend lost a job he loved. His friends and coworkers appreciated his accomplishments, but his supervisor seemed strangely distant, offering naïve criticism and little praise. Feeling throttled and under-appreciated at an otherwise satisfying job frustrated Bob immensely. Losing his livelihood was even worse. Then there's a family member. She knew something was wrong before the doctor even spoke. "Your biopsy shows a malignancy," he explained. "A lumpectomy or mastectomy might remove this cancer." The next few moments were a swirl of confusion as she struggled to grasp what was happening. This wasn't supposed to be part of her charmed life: always class president, cheerleader, proud wife and parent. Cancer happened to other people. How was she supposed to handle this tragedy? When I survey my own life, I realize I'm no different than my friends. We all experience disappointment: troubled relationships, poor job evaluations or test scores, death of a loved one, health challenges, social snubs, and the like..

Disappointment can compound into depression or despair, which may lead to serious consequences. UCLA psychologist James C. Coleman lists several examples. "Shipwreck victims who lose hope may die after a few days," he says, "even though physiologically they could have survived many days longer." He notes that despair can contribute to suicide, while hopelessness bred by poverty might manifest as apathy. "Values, meaning, and hope appear to act as catalysts" for mobilizing energy and finding satisfaction. Without them, Coleman reports,

life can seem futile. Each of us needs to develop a sense of self-worth, a capacity for positive self-regard that comes from within.

Part of what we may need to do in order to encourage that positive self-regard is to forgive ourselves for being “imperfect” or making mistakes. The nature of being human is being imperfect. We, as human beings, make mistakes every day. Making mistakes can be a great learning experience. Finding out how not to do something can be as important as discovering the correct way to do it. Some of the world’s greatest discoveries and inventions were the results of mistakes. The critical part in learning from our mistakes lies in how we deal with ourselves in relation to our mistakes. Forgiving ourselves tends to be very difficult for some of us. Often, we will beat ourselves up for doing the very thing that human beings are famous for- making mistakes. This “beating ourselves up” can have wide-ranging consequences. Grudges, negative thinking, disappointments, and not forgiving all get in the way of what can be done with the present. We need our psyche energies to seize opportunities we can take advantage of. This can’t happen, if our energies are used up ruminating.

We must stop feeling guilty. Guilt is destructive, corrosive, and an incredible misallocation of energy. As long as we allow guilt to weigh us down, we can’t fully experience freedom and joy, and self-realization.” By forgiving ourselves and by not taking ourselves too seriously, we can move out of self deprecation and into self confidence. Forgiveness allows you to take from the mistake what you need and leave the rest. It allows you to move past the ‘mistake’ and into a state of grace.... Better than that, it allows you to move into action.”

What we are really talking about is self compassion. I’ve shared with you many times that I experienced physical and verbal abuse daily as a child. There was a voice placed inside of me that constantly told me I was worthless, stupid, and a burden. I heard these words and more everyday and eventually I believed them. This led to a very complicated early adulthood. I had no confidence, felt less than, and always putting myself down. I was mean and impatient with myself. Even worse, my first ministry experience exacerbated these thoughts and feelings. When I met my supervising minister he told me that he had all the power and over two years he routinely degraded me privately and publicly. He even dared to call me a faggot. All of this reinforced what I already was telling myself. Then something wonderful happened. My next supervising minister told me I was enough. I was enough. I started to believe that and was eventually able to silence that destructive voice within me. Since then I’ve been nothing less than authentic, enough, and compassionate toward myself—giving myself a break, accepting that suffering is a part of life.

What if, in order to save ourselves and the world, we must love ourselves for who we are, just as we are? The kind of self-love and self-compassion that I am talking about costs no money. It is not about lattes and fancy cars. It is about a deep-down, full-hearted knowing that you are loved, loveable, and worthy. Regardless. In spite of. Always.

Sufi mystic Jalal Ad-Din Rumi wrote, “You suppose you are the trouble, but you are the cure. You suppose that you are the lock on the door, but you are the key that opens it. It is too bad that you want to be someone else.” We learned the same thing in our story of the stone cutter this morning.

Jesus' message was about love—radical, nonviolent, all-encompassing love; love that works for justice and compassion in the world. It has to begin with love for ourselves.

Let's practice a little self-compassion now. This is an exercise a colleague chose to do with his congregation. I invite you to find a position in which you are relaxed, yet alert. Take a deep breath in, then let it go. Relax your shoulders. Put your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands easily in your lap. If you feel comfortable doing so, close your eyes. Think of a situation in your life that's difficult and unsatisfactory. Something in the mild to moderate range, not something overwhelming. Maybe you're feeling inadequate in some way, or you're really sad about something that's happening in your life... As the problem comes to mind, give yourself permission to feel your way into it, noting any uneasiness you experience in your body. Where do you feel that discomfort the most? And as we enter into this practice more fully, I'm going to invite you to experiment with saying three self-compassion phrases silently to yourself. First, try saying silently to yourself, slowly and calmly, "This is a moment of suffering." Just acknowledging and being mindfully present to what you are experiencing. "This is a moment of suffering." Second, try saying silently to yourself, "Suffering is a part of life." Here the idea is to remind ourselves that we are connected to a common humanity: "Suffering is a part of life." "We all face challenges in our lives." Third, try saying, "May I be kind to myself." This phrase calls in the power of love and kindness. If you feel comfortable doing so, place one hand on your heart.. Say: "May I be kind to myself." If these phrases we've been using don't feel quite right, imagine that a dear friend is having the same problem as you. What would you say to that person, heart to heart, to soothe and comfort them? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself? Now, as you feel ready, I invite you to gently open your eyes and return your attention to the room. That self-compassion practice may have seemed simple: • acknowledging when suffering is arising ("This is a moment of suffering"), • reminding ourselves that all humans suffer ("Suffering is a part of life"), and • setting an intention to be compassionate to ourselves ("May I be kind to myself." "May I be peaceful and at ease"). Yet, this simple self-compassion practice can create a significant shift to both health and healing in our experience of ourselves, others, and the world. Now, what we've been exploring so far is the tender side of the self-compassion spectrum, the side that directs our caring, kindness, and friendliness toward ourselves.

Self-compassion has three main components: (1) self-kindness, (2) a sense of common humanity, and (3) mindfulness. Self-kindness entails being warm and caring toward ourselves when things go wrong in our lives. Common humanity recognizes the shared nature of suffering when difficult situations arise, rather than feeling desperately alone. And mindfulness refers here to the ability to open to painful experience ("this hurts!") with nonreactive, balanced awareness. Taken together, self-compassion is precisely the opposite of our typical reactions to internal threat—self-criticism, self-isolation, and self-absorption. Self-compassion teaches us to treat ourselves as we would a dear friend; touching our own hearts compassionately – physically with hands on heart or spiritually with wishes for comfort and ease; accepting and forgiving our own mistakes and flaws as we do those of our friends; even breathing compassionately, with the intention of bringing in comfort.

(cite)There is a core of goodness, of light, and of love inside of you, inside of us all, that is always there. It is there regardless of what happens in our lives or how others perceive us or treat us. It is there beneath our shame, our fear, and our doubt. I want to leave you with the words of C.S. Lewis. He said, "Experience: the most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God do you learn."

May it be so.