

Session 5: Our response to suffering, continued

Focusing on fellowship

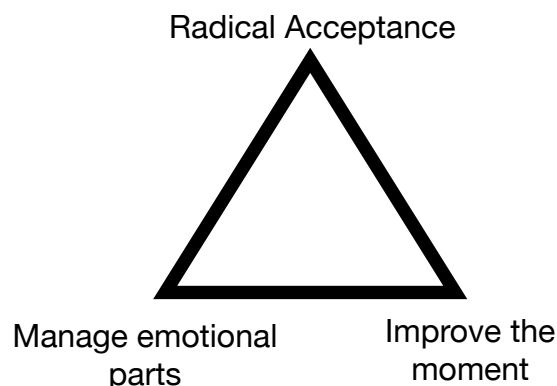
- One of the first things that happens when tragedy strikes is that we feel alone in our pain and separated from others. We fear that we have failed in some way and that our suffering will be too much for others. One of the worst things you can do when suffering is keep it inside yourself. Do NOT isolate - be part of a community. Circle the wagons for support.
- Learn how to talk to others about your life and your suffering. It's a skill. Share something positive, followed by what you are concerned about if you worry about feeling exposed.
- Get a therapist, mentor and/or a "journey pal". A mentor is someone who has already been through a lot. If addiction is a problem, join a fellowship that addresses the problem. Go to AA if needed, or AlAnon. (Al Anon is for the family members of alcoholics.) Find a good Sunday School class or a church-sponsored or community-sponsored support group where honesty is valued and people aren't easily shaken.
 - If you can, join groups of people who have experiences like your own. Don't attempt to unpack huge feelings without the support of others to help you with them. You may need multiple places to share. Be gentle with yourself.
 - It may take some work to find a good group where there is both a positive focus and a compassionate listening ear, as well as some gentle, practical help in recovery from whatever is happening.
 - Those who have chronic pain sometimes have "pain pals"—people who, like themselves, are going through pain. When they are in pain and medication is not helping, they call one another and talk until the pain passes. It doesn't matter what they talk about...not being alone and being distracted helps until the pain gets better for the moment, at least.
- Let others feel important and useful to you. Don't be above receiving—being able to receive love is an important skill. At the same time, don't lump all of your valid needs on one person...spread yourself around to a network of friends. You will feel better about yourself. Assisting with certain tasks will be natural for some people, while other tasks will stress them. Find out who likes what. Some people will grocery shop, while others will take you to the doctor.
- Learn how to give as an adult but receive as a child. Take in the good that comes your way into your inner, childlike self and take time to celebrate it. To refuse help is to tell someone they are of no use to you, and to deny a compliment is to take the gift they just gave you and discard it in front of them. Tell others that they made your day...and maybe they will give you more in the future. Others want to feel like they can help.

Practicing good self care and care for others

• The basics

- Look after your body (exercise, good food) and your mind, and get professional help in areas where you need it. Don't worry about being weak and needing help...we're all weak and need help. Those who do help us can only help us so much anyhow, so find whatever help you can. We must admit our need for others, including professionals.
- Spend some time on the internet looking for self-care ideas and how to select a good professional in your area of concern.
- Beware of "The four deadly 'D's' of depression" - Feeling *defective, defeated, deserted, and deprived*. When you're down, attempt to identify those beliefs and counter them.
 - If you are depressed and all you can do is make a cup of tea, then make a cup of tea. There will always a next step that you *are* able to take when you feel immobilized. Find it. Then find the next step.
- Give to others as you are able
 - Work to reduce others' suffering whenever you can
 - Pray for others
- Be careful about guilt. Accepting responsibility for your actions is important, but don't take on more guilt than is true or assume that every difficult experience is the result of some wrongdoing on your part. Even if you have done something wrong, you are not likely to have done something uniquely wrong more than all of us do at one time or another, and there may be extenuating circumstances that partly account for your behavior.
- Similar to guilt, be wary of shame—the feeling that you don't measure up. Finding out that reasonable others identify with you will reduce shame. When you share with others, look for their reciprocal response of sharing something vulnerable—it's a sign of a healthy person and can make a world of difference to you.
- If your behavior harmed someone, consider how an amends might be made. The topic of amends is a bit complicated, but can be discussed with someone familiar with it. People who are experienced with 12-step programs will have ideas about what to do and what not to do.

• The emotional triad



- Radical acceptance

- Radical acceptance is one way that we can reduce our suffering while also increasing our sense of personal freedom.
- It is a willingness to accept right now things as they are right now. It includes an acceptance of the difficulty associated with your circumstances and a focus on the actions needed to move forward.
- Do not increase your suffering by judging the fairness of the situation or attaching excess meaning to it. Don't give in to fantasy and "live in the wreckage of your future". Take things one day at a time.
- It is NOT approving of what is happening, but rather accepting that there is no way to make reality go away, even if you do not like it.
- *Ask what, not why.* Not "Why is this happening to me?", but "This is my reality so far...**what** do I need to do next?"
- Cultivate positive curiosity—it's powerful.
 - "I wonder what this situation is going to bring me as I work with it?"
 - "Where might I go? Whom might I meet? What might I notice or learn?"
 - Positive curiosity can be really motivating.
 - Tell yourself: "It might not be as bad as I imagine."
- There is a lot involved with this that we cannot take into account here—like processing your emotions with others (and God), receiving comfort, and doing what you can to soothe yourself. It also assumes that you have already done what you can do to change the situation.
- Radical acceptance means that you are not fighting reality or over-interpreting it.

- Manage emotional parts

- Think of yourself as a car with you as the driver and your upset feelings as passengers.
- The driver part of you (the "core you") will typically be relatively grounded in your thoughts and feelings, while your passengers are less so. Your stronger feelings may attempt to merge with you and take over the wheel. When this happens, and it may already have happened for years with some feelings, kindly and gently ask those feelings to step back and tell you about their concerns. Keep doing this until you feel like you are your grounded self.
- Respect your feelings—don't hate them. It can feel very much like you are having an internal conversation.
- Work with them. They are a part of you, but don't let them hijack you. If they seem large, say to yourself, "Wow, I'm having a lot of BIG feelings!" Verbalize them to someone else.

- Even violent feelings can mean well, though their ideas about how to solve problems probably will not actually bring about the results that they imagine. Recognize the good you can find in their reasoning, and express your agreement. But reason with them, and offer reassurance that you understand their perspective and your appreciation of their passion and concern. They may be young and afraid, and it may take time. Also, different feelings/parts may need to be dealt with one at a time. You could have several passengers to contend with. They can get complicated and will each have their own ideas about how you should be handling the situations in your life.
- All of us experience ourselves somewhat like this already. We sometimes say, “One part of me feels (this way), but another part of me feels (that way)”. Talk to exaggerated feelings—but kindly and gently. “We will be able to manage it, especially with the help of God and others.” Seek to win their trust. If a part seems lonely, offer them a hug in your imagination. Form a relationship and aim for healing.
- Do not boss or criticize, but think of your feelings as young with only a fragmented understanding of what is happening. Let them “talk”. If they need help you don’t know how to offer, get help about what to say.
- Some people think of it as if they had small, well-meaning but scared, people inside of them. If you need to get some therapy, someone trained in Internal Family Systems will understand all of this in much more detail. Don’t go rushing into something like this if your situation is extreme. Get help.

- Improve the moment

- Lift your mood, create moments of joy
- Involve others, bookend difficult events
- Without taking too many liberties, we can hypothesize some of this at work in Jesus’ life
 - On the night before he was crucified Jesus prayed and asked for “this cup” to pass, and he brought his disciples with him when he did so. (He brought others into his situation.) He did not get what he asked for, and when the disciples continually fell asleep, apparently he focused on the joy set before him, according to Hebrews. We *could* say he improved the moment twice before enduring the suffering.
 - Hebrews 12:2looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
- Creating moments of joy
 - Joy comes in moments rather than days. We can help to create them.
 - We can’t force joy like a drug, but we can make it more likely it through things we do.
 - Your suggestions in the “Creating moments of joy” handout.



Thanks so much for your participation in this class. We'll close by promoting a moment of joy right now. I'll play "*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*" once again, and then we'll take any final comments and say our good byes.

Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might,
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life thou givest, to both great and small.
In all life thou livest, the true life of all.
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight.
All praise we would render; O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

Homework

1. Spend some time reading James 1 and Romans 8. Use the worksheets provided.
2. Look at the other handouts. I've included a page from "My Manifesto", something I have put together over the years to help me clarify what I believe. I tend to work on it when times are tough. Who knows...maybe someday I'll live up to what I've written here. Some of it is aspirational.
3. Come back to these notes when things are difficult. If you have questions, give me a call or drop me an email. I'll be glad to respond. And remember, the church staff are glad to meet with you to help you through a tough time also.