

SELF-ACCEPTANCE – THE ANTIDOTE TO SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist,
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
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Spending three months on sabbatical exploring mindfulness and meditation, I've come across some intriguing meditation exercises. For example, here's an exercise entitled "Call your name". It's in the book *Soulfulness* by Brian Draper.

"Sit in a room quietly with the door closed, preferably at home, and make sure you have you have a few minutes when you will not be interrupted. Make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes, and bring your attention to your breath. Relax, and pause for a short while. When you are ready, say your own name, gently and compassionately. Leave a gap of five seconds or so, and repeat. Keep doing this for a few minutes, over and over. You'll find, before long, that it feels like someone else is calling you. It's as if someone is waking you up. As this happens, invite your soul to respond to the call. Allow your soulself some time and space just to be."¹

The writer wisely says "You may feel slightly silly doing this". But "You never know you might be surprised who you really are."

Many of us would find this exercise awkward and embarrassing because we have difficulty accepting ourselves. We are not comfortable with who we are; we don't feel comfortable in our own skin.

This is a pity because God accepts us as we are. We don't need to feel ashamed or embarrassed about parts of ourselves. The journey to wholeness is a journey of learning to see ourselves as God sees us. And God looks at us with compassion, not with blame. God loves you unconditionally. The journey to wholeness is learning to love yourself unconditionally.

Until then we have to endure various bumps in the road. The journey to wholeness involves many trails and painful awakenings. And in the mean time we cause each other pain and suffering. Whilst we can't accept parts of ourselves, parts of who and how we are we find it difficult to accept other people unconditionally. We live with that tendency to lash out at someone else rather than acknowledge fault in me; to blame another person for what I can't accept about myself and my life. Often we do it without even realising.

If we spend any time in silence or in meditation, if we spend any time reflecting on how we respond to other people, we can learn deep truths about ourselves. "When we face a situation in which we feel indignant, [infuriated] ... [with careful reflection] we will discover bitter truths about ourselves: for example, that we are selfish; we are egocentric; ... we hold on to our opinions; we think we are right and everyone else is wrong ... and at the bottom of all this, we do not really love ourselves."²

"This discovery, though bitter, is a most rewarding experience."³ I love the parts of myself that I like, but reject the parts I think are "bad". To accept myself means accepting those parts too – all of myself.

¹ *Soulfulness* by Brian Draper p. 96-97

² Bhante Gunarartana *Mindfulness in Plain English* p.41

³ *Ibid*

Like us, the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus time struggled with self-acceptance. In them we see the dangerous cocktail of religious conviction and lack of self-love.

The parables in this morning's Gospel are so familiar to us that they have lost their original potency. Jesus tells the parables in response to the Pharisees and scribes saying "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."⁴ The parables can seem quaint, so its easy for us to miss their sharpness. "There's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."

Jesus is once again pierces their bubble of religious superiority. Jesus comes down heavy on the self-righteousness that harms other people. And underneath the self-righteousness is a lack of self-acceptance. The Pharisees and scribes do me a favour by reminding me of the truth that whenever I demonise someone else it stems from not loving myself.

One significant experience on sabbatical was meeting a Buddhist teacher. I was on retreat at a place called The Barn, on the Sharpham Estate in Devon. The Buddhist teacher visited to lead one session. We had been warned that he often generated strong reactions in people – like Marmite, people loved him or hated him. I love Marmite, but I struggled with this teacher. He seemed anxious and unprepared. He led us in a meditation to connect us with the infinite, the deeper reality that surrounds us all. This involved working through our body, imagining our breath passing in and out of our skin. I confess I struggled to imagine my breath moving in and out of my big toe, so I spent the first half of the meditation want to shout out 'this is bullshit'.

I'm glad I didn't, because by the end of the meditation my experience was like deep prayer, being held by the God's everlasting presence. The Buddhist teacher described this greater reality as a motherly, velvetine darkness that supports all life. What I, we call God.

Later that day, a few of us on the retreat were talking about the experience. The retreat leader pointed out that Mahesi, the Buddhist teacher, provokes in us things that are preventing our freedom and fullness of life. So our attention rushes away from us and onto him, blaming him. For me, I was expecting a Buddhist teacher to be calm, loving, a skilful teacher giving me perfect nuggets of wisdom and insight. That expectation prevented me loving and accepting him as he is – an imperfect human being.

So I moved from thinking "this is bullshit" to feeling deep gratitude for Mahesi helping me see a limitation in myself; teaching me that everyone who creates an aversion, a negative response in me can be my teacher. They provoke in me what is preventing my wholeness, what is limiting my abundant living.

People we react against can help us excavate our hidden treasure which we've been unaware of. This is the hidden treasure that God sees. To stretch the parables, we might say in us is the lost sheep or the lost coin that God knows is there waiting to be found.

How can we learn to see ourselves as God sees us? That is with compassion, not with blame; with unconditional love. It is a long journey that you can't force. It depends on grace removing the barriers I have put up against love.

One thing can help reduce the self-righteousness. Whenever you notice the urge to demonise someone else you can pause and soften your response. You will fail, of course - it's what we do. But when you do fail, crucially don't beat yourself up, don't demonise yourself – soften your response. When you notice the urge to demonise someone else, notice your response

⁴ Luke 15.1-10

and accept it. Mysteriously, if you resist how you feel, that feeling hardens. If you soften and accept how you feel, the feeling reduces.

There is joy in heaven when you move towards self-acceptance; when you see yourself with compassion.

Canon Matthew Vernon
Canon Pastor & Sub Dean