

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 29, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

FREEING OURSELVES FROM COMPARISON THINKING

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and Redeemer.”

There is no doubt that negative comparison thinking can be exploited for money.

Two Jewish men, disguised as beggars, were sitting on the sidewalk in Ireland. One was holding a large Cross and the other a large Star of David. Both were holding hats to collect contributions. As people walked by, they lifted their noses at the guy holding the Star of David but dropped money in the other guy's hat. Soon one hat was nearly full, while the other hat was empty.

A priest was watching them and then approached the guy with the Star of David and said, "Don't you realize that this is a Christian country? You'll never get any contributions in this country holding a Star of David."

The guy holding the Star of David then turned to the guy holding the Cross and said, "Abraham, look who's trying to teach us Marketing."

From the Book of Exodus:

“Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife. Male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else your neighbor owns.”

Coveting stems from making negative comparisons that can become hurtful. It is of course possible to make useful positive comparisons as well. But there is also a downside to making comparisons that I want to talk about today.

Consider this: behind all envy, all desiring of what is someone else's, behind all grading of achievements, behind all trying to get ahead and status seeking, behind all these things there is a comparison. Comparing our selves unfavorably toward others has led to murder, to jealousy, to theft. In the Hebrew Bible it is the reason given for the murder of Abel and in the Christian scriptures it is the motive behind the crucifixion of Christ, for Pilate said he was aware that the chief priests and elders delivered him up out **of envy**- in comparison to Christ they didn't look so good..

Behind so much that is evil in the world lies negative comparison thinking. How do we get into this kind of thinking?

Mary Joe West at the age of 24 was the first female news anchor in Phoenix. In high school there had been a \$100 prize given to the best all round graduating student. Mary Joe had determined to win that prize at all costs. She won it **but it set a pattern for her life.**

To stay at the top of the news ratings Mary Joe overworked going several days a week without even seeing her husband. Her husband set up a time away for them on a short holiday. The morning they arrived there was a call from the radio station that the top male anchor had left. “What will this do to the ratings?” said Mary Joe. Her husband asked her to drop the subject because they were on a vacation. Mary Joe could not do that. “Can't you forget about it for a couple of days?” he pleaded.

“What else is there?” Mary Joe shot back. “Can't you understand that this is the most important thing in my life now? Her husband looked at her sadly and said: ‘I thought the most important thing was us.’ They soon divorced.

Six years later CBS New York offered her a job as news anchor on Nightwatch. She worked 12-hour days. She had little or no personal life other than work and she was cracking up inside.

One day she went into St Patrick's Cathedral to pray and after prayer she knew she had to go home to Phoenix. Back in Phoenix however the destructive pattern reasserted itself. Hired to reverse poor ratings she failed and was fired. No one in Phoenix would touch her now. She saw a poster advertising a movie on Mother Theresa and went in to watch it.

She saw in Mother Theresa someone who had dealt with comparison thinking at the roots, for Mother Theresa gave society's rejects **ultimate worth**. She looked after them as if they were Jesus himself and Mary Joe got the message.

She spent the next year as a volunteer with the poor, the homeless and abandoned, working for St Vincent de Paul. She learned there a total reversal of the values that come from comparison thinking.

What had happened to Mary Joe West? She had fallen into a very common trap. **She had compared herself constantly to others. Is that your problem today?**

Wayne Dyer in his book Your Sacred Self writes:

Ego tells you If he/ she can, so can you. You are much smarter, prettier, stronger more spiritual, more stable than he or she is... You are the best, now prove it to everyone... maximize your achievements... you should be offended when someone gets ahead of you.

Dyer was right, wasn't he?

Our society goes out of its way to cater to this human folly. Got to have the latest fastest or most environmentally green car. It will give us status if we buy it. The house is advertised as being in an *exclusive setting* in an *upscale* neighborhood etc.

In other words, society would have us all into *striving*. But does striving lead to peace of mind? No striving is full of worry, self imposed deadlines, self imposed pressure, peer pressure. We must be successful and acquire things and lots of money- but peace? Peace goes out the window and is replaced with high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes!

I want you to ask yourself today and be honest with your answer **Do you have peace of mind?** Wow, what a question! I have thought a lot about that in my own case and my answer is this: When I get into comparison thinking I lose peace of mind! So, here are some helpful insights from the BIBLE.

1) In the Hebrew tradition and the Christian tradition, it is made very clear that all human beings have equal value in the sight of God. The image of God is in all of us, regardless of our differences. This is true of men and women, people of different races and creeds- all have worth in the eyes of God regardless of their achievements or lack of them. God does not look on our qualification or our abilities to establish our worth. We have worth *regardless just* because we are children of God.

Do we remember that the Christian scripture tells us that even our enemies have the image of God? Our enemies also have a best self however far down it has been driven!

Our enemies are loved by God. In other words, The competition is loved by God!!

How do we get out of comparison thinking? Several ways...

1) A man died and approached the Pearly Gates. St. Peter told him heaven was getting crowded, so he had to Grade people with the point system. If he got to 100 points he could enter. The man told Peter that he gave to the poor and that was more than others did. Peter marked him down for 3 points. The man thought again, then said that he tithed, which was more than others did. Peter added one point. The man, desperately searching his memory, finally said that he never cussed, and everybody cussed. Peter added 1/2 a point. By now the man got very frustrated and said You know at this rate I could only get in by the Grace of God." And Peter replied, "Come on in!"

2) God has made all of us different and all the same at once. We have different gifts. The Historical Jesus taught us that we are all distinct in the eyes of God. God counts the hairs on

our heads. Look at our fingerprints; yet we can donate kidneys across the sexes and other organs. But you say “Aha I have got you!

Differences can lead to making comparisons and that can lead to envy and jealousy.”

But when we avoid negative comparison thinking, we move away from jealousy towards **appreciation**. Both jealousy and appreciation are similar in one respect. Both responses are aware that other people have different gifts and abilities. Appreciation accepts that, rejoices in it, but jealousy does not.

Jealousy says, “Look if I had her brains, I wouldn’t have lost my husband to her.” Jealousy calls for a reversal of the status quo to put oneself where the other person is; to put us into that special job, that love relationship, that lifestyle.

But jealousy is far and away from peace of mind.

Do we want peace of mind? Then we rejoice in the gifts and abilities of others- we accept them, appreciate them, **celebrate** them! And we are doing that today at NSJ.

3) A third way out of comparison thinking is to seek excellence, not just to get ahead, but excellence for the thing itself. Every musician knows this truth. If Bach wrote the music, **play it so that Bach appears!**

When you are doing plumbing do it so that it works really well and is up to standards and is neatly installed. There is huge satisfaction *in doing the task for itself*. The Hebrew Bible says it this way:

“Whatsoever your hand finds to do, **do it with your might.**”

4) The historical Jesus taught us not to judge or condemn others which uses negative comparisons. *This means avoiding the critical spirit entirely*. Sometimes we get critical because we have lost power. We wanted to get on a particular committee or board. We don’t make it, so we resort to criticism of the board.

When this happens to those of us who did make it on the board, Wayne Dyer has some good advice. He says whenever we meet our critics, we are to simply put the word **love** in our thinking and repeat it over and over mentally, when we see that person or talk with them. Let that critical person be. Remember they too have God’s spirit. Christ’s rule is simple: Don’t condemn other people. Peace of mind does not lie; not that way! **Think Love instead**. Jesus said: “Love your enemies and do good to those who use you badly.”

5) Christ did not mean that we are not to make appraisals of others. But when we do, they are to be **ethical** appraisals. When we hire someone, an ethical appraisal will look at all the relevant factors of ability and experience seeking for a **fit** for the job and the most loving thing to do for all concerned, including the applicant. If the applicant does not fit, it is not loving to hire anyway out of compassion for the applicant. Similarly, it is not appropriate for the applicant to take a job that isn’t right for them in order to help an organization out. **Fit** is what it’s all about. An ethical appraisal always does the most loving thing, all things considered.

6) What happens when we are into comparison thinking and we don’t get that dream job that status position we were looking for?

“I blew it!” we say, and we begin to beat ourselves up!

On the other hand, if we get the position, we have to stay first, stay the best, keep that status job. *Remember the ratings!* We have to stay ahead of the competition. And it becomes a treadmill. In both these cases we lose peace of mind. We lose it when we fail. We lose it when we win.

Is there a better way? Well thank God there is!

St Paul wrote that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. When we are beating ourselves up because we had some weakness or other, **remember that it is okay to have weaknesses**. When you have not made it in that status job, when you have blown that job interview, relax. That is precisely when God's power can shine through your weakness.

Elizabeth Barret Browning once wrote these beautiful words **God's greatness flows around our incompleteness**.

We are not supposed to be perfect! No one of us is complete, our completeness comes only with God flowing around us. So next time you are in an interview or in a performance situation, relax, let go and let God... let God's peace fill you before you speak or sing or perform and that weakness will suddenly become a strength, for you will be **authentic** a rare commodity in this Hype filled world, and your humility will show. Humility always comes from knowing that we are incomplete, no matter how gifted we are, **and humility is very attractive in any person**.

I checked on Mary Joe West on Google the other day. She worked for the Catholics in PR for awhile at St Vincent de Paul. Today she still works in Phoenix for a private company.

When she started to put her life on track, she took a non status job. She went back to being a station manager for a local cable station. She adopted a child from a Mother Theresa orphanage. She wrote at that time "I don't have the glamour or the salary of my earlier jobs, but I did have something better- love, happiness and **peace of mind**. That is God's idea of being first."

She has also struggled successfully with bipolar disorder over the years and at the same time she has found happiness, no small achievement. The secret? **She has let God's greatness flow around her incompleteness. Can you do that today?**

I have a suggestion: There is one valid comparison we all can make in our lives. If we jettison comparison thinking and choose love and happiness instead, we will have something to compare alright. If you do this there will be a new you, which will bear no comparison to your old self. If we let God flow around our incompleteness, then we will discover what St Paul taught us about the heart of Christianity understood as following the teachings of Jesus about not judging others. "The old things are passed away; behold all things are become new." Nonjudgment!

For there is no comparison to a life filled with peace of mind and one without peace. No comparison at all!