

Sermon: In Defense of Self-Compassion (service leader)

The holidays are hard. I'll confess that Thanksgiving is one of my least favorite holidays, personally. Part of being a minister also means that I know I'm not alone in this sentiment. This week brings together issues of family, present or missing, with issues of food and the moralizing of bodies, add in a dash of all the landmines of politics and American history and polite conversation, and then top with a command to be grateful! And still, you might love Thanksgiving and then feel a little weird that you're not being more woke about it, or insert any other self-judgment. Point being, pie is great and life is complicated.

So for our interfaith Thanksgiving service on Tuesday night, our focus was on lifting up our shared humanity. Members of different religious traditions were invited to lift up songs or passages, I gave a short reflection, all on this idea of shared humanity.

The Christian scripture was Jesus's greatest commandment from the book of Matthew. In the passage, an expert in the law is testing Jesus and asks "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law." And Jesus replies "Love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment," he says. Then adds "And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

In the spring I'm going to do a service on different ideas about what God means, but for today the important piece is the second commandment. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

I think we understand this to mean caring for others, but the way it's actually stated requires some level of care for ourselves. The pair to the commandment to love your neighbor would be an invitation to self-compassion: that is, to treat ourselves with the same kindness we give a friend.

I thought it might be a good thing to reflect on during this season of expectation and strain.

I first encountered the concept of self-compassion at a staff training day at the University of Minnesota Medical Center when I was doing my chaplaincy rotation.

Self-compassion is central to Buddhist teachings and became the subject of Dr. Kristin Neff's psychology research. Neff has woven together this central tenet of self-compassion with our understandings of human psychology. Hospitals can't teach religion, so we were introduced to the idea of self-compassion through Neff's research.

Neff defines self-compassion as comprising of three things:

1. self-kindness vs. self-judgment
2. common humanity vs. isolation
3. mindfulness vs. over-identification

Neff writes:

One, "self-compassion entails being warm and understanding towards ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism."

Two, "self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the sacred human experience - something that we all go through rather than something that happens to 'me' alone."

Three, "self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated... We cannot ignore our pain... and at the same time, mindfulness requires that we not be 'over-identified' with thoughts and feelings."

So step one: acknowledge our suffering with kindness

Step two: remember that suffering is part of being human and we're not alone

Step three: remember that we are not our suffering

Often when I'm worship planning, I use the database on the UUA website that has collections of words and readings from contemporary ministers and lay leaders.

There's a search function so you just type in the topic and see what comes. When I

typed in “self-compassion” there were a whole lot of things that popped up and they weren’t really about self-compassion in a helpful way. So I tried searching “compassion” alone and guess how many results there were - 689.

That loving our neighbor thing can be a whole lot easier than loving ourselves sometimes.

Our culture is very averse to suffering - we talked about this last Sunday. There’s this impulse for everything to have to either be an inspiration or be your fault - some of you sent me examples this week of just this kind of “making you stronger” cringey story telling.

So we’re not very good, collectively, at this way of gently telling the truth about suffering. Holding it with a kind open hand that sees our shared humanity and doesn’t try to cage it in or fix it.

So I want to invite you into this practice of self-compassion, not only so that we might treat ourselves with greater kindness, but because our tolerance for holding suffering without fixing or blaming is a gift. This is that post-traumatic wisdom theology that says our suffering is real and that it does not define us.

During the prayer and meditation, we’re going to do guided meditation from Dr. Neff that takes us through the steps of self-compassion.

Step one: turn towards our suffering with kindness

Step two: turn towards the world and remember our experience is part of the human experience - we’re not alone

Step three: hold lightly and let it be

This season can bring up all kinds of pain, dialing up the contrast between what is true and what we wish were true to dizzying levels. It’s okay if you’re feeling very human amidst all the glitter and expectation.

May we enter this season with an abundance of compassion for each other and ourselves.

Amen.

<https://self-compassion.org/>