

Day 33: Sunday, Introduction of Acceptance

Accepting Reality

*“It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he gives sleep to his beloved.”—
Psalm 127:2*

Acceptance should not be confused with superficial happiness or the idea that the grieving person is okay with their own or a loved one's death. According to Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*, acceptance is a stage that is almost devoid of feeling. The struggle to live has ended for the dying. The fight to keep a loved one alive is surrendered. The reality of death is accepted, and it is time to rest.

In this stage, the dying loved one will need to sleep a lot. Kübler-Ross likens it to the sleep needs of a newborn child, just reversed. Sleeping is not an avoidance of death like in the stage of depression. Rather, the dying loved one is exhausted and weak and needs the rest.

For those grieving the death of a loved one, acceptance is a process of withdrawing energy from the loss, ruminating on it and reliving it, while beginning to invest energy in living again. Acceptance may just mean having more good days than bad, according to Kessler and Kübler-Ross in *On Grief and Grieving*. And during the good days, guilt may arise, the feeling that we are betraying our loved one by enjoying life. This is life's natural process, though. What's lost cannot be replaced. But new relationships, new experiences, new joys, new sorrows await the living. Grief demands its time. Then we need to live again.

Prayer: *God of grace, tend to the needs of the grieving, guiding them to a place of acceptance and rest. Remind us of your comforting presence. Remind us that we are not isolated or alone when the fight for life concludes and we are ready for what comes next. Amen.*

Teri

Day 34: Monday

Why Can't I Just ...?

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”—Luke 15:20

On the very first pitch of a city-league softball game, a ball came sailing my way. I dove like I would have in my teenage years — and it became apparent that the late-20s version of me didn't quite have “it” anymore.

I missed the ball. Instead, my body crashed atop my left hand, immediately crushing multiple bones.

The injury was horribly painful in the moment, but I also figured that – like everything else in my life up to that point – it would heal up like nothing had happened.

But it never did.

Even with physical therapy, scar-reducing cream and my can-do attitude, my left hand remains weaker than it used to be. It cramps when bad weather is coming. And the scars remain visible.

For a while, this outcome proved difficult to accept. Why can't I just have my old hand back?

I imagine many of us have known this lament for things far more significant: *Why can't I just have my [fill in the blank] back?*

A couple years later, I was sitting with my mom when she quietly took my left hand into her hands and rubbed my scars. Somehow, as her hands of love held my scars, something within me released. It was quiet, but it was also deep and real. I experienced within myself a new level of acceptance about my hand, and it felt like hope.

My experience relates to one reason why the father embraces the son on that prodigal path. Our pain, shame and can't-be-undones must know love's embrace before we can live freely and fully into the new chapter before us.

Prayer: Gracious God, may our every wound, ache and injury know your fresh embrace. Transform them into quiet scars that tell a story of pain — and also of love, healing and redemption. Amen.

Bobby

Day 35: Tuesday

Joy amid Weeping

“The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping.” — Ezra 3:13

The book of Ezra recounts how the people of God were invited out of exile and back to Jerusalem, where they were granted permission to rebuild the Temple.

The rebuilding moment is festive. As builders laid the foundation, the priests wore their vestments and played trumpets and cymbals, and all the people gave a great shout of praise!

Well, a lot of them anyway.

Many of the older priests and family heads wept aloud. They were the ones who could recall the grandeur and glory of Solomon’s Temple, and this new one simply did not compare.

And so it was: joy and weeping. A singular, indistinguishable reality.

The truth is that the mixture of joy and weeping is the paradoxical sound of God’s people, who are ever participating in God’s Kingdom-building work.

If our gatherings are only ever happy, glad and hopeful about how great everything is, then we are denying a critical truth that needs space. Sorrow, grief and brokenness are inevitable parts of our journey.

If our gatherings are only ever sorrowful, down and dejected, filled with complaints about how things will never be like they used to be, then we are denying a critical hope that needs space. Joy, gladness and living hope are central to the journey of faith.

A faithful church fully accepts that joy and weeping are our true sound — at least until Christ comes again. Until then, we give thanks for both the joy and weeping, all of which unfolds upon the sure and eternal foundation of Jesus himself.

Prayer: God of joy and grief, thank you for making room for it all. When our joy turns superficial, call us back to you and your care for the things that break your heart. When our sorrow turns to cynicism, call us back to you and your care for the things that gladden your heart. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 36: Wednesday

“Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” — Isaiah 40:31

My first track workout in high school was running intervals with a group of older girls who had been running for a few years. At that age, I was shy, anxious and awkward, confident I would fail at everything I tried. I told myself I’d just try to keep up. But my legs surprised me, wanting, needing to go faster. I pulled away from the pack and for the first time in my life took the lead, a pace and a position I didn’t realize I had in me.

When you discover you have athletic gifts in a culture that supremely prizes those gifts, your sport can become an obsession, even in the face of slim chances. I dreamed of “going pro,” pictured myself waving from the Olympic podium, fell asleep each night beneath posters of my heroes: Florence Griffith Joyner, Joan Benoit Samuelson, Jackie Joyner-Kersey. I prayed, *God, give me the strength to win. God, make my dreams come true.*

When I hit my ceiling in college – no Olympics, no going pro, even my dream of qualifying for nationals was dashed – I grieved the loss of competing in a sport I loved. “Athlete” was not just what I did but who I was.

Grieving this loss of identity, I floundered, until God came calling again.

Chariots of Fire, my favorite running movie, includes a scene where Eric Liddel, Scotland's fastest man, explains to his sister Jenny why he needs to compete in the Olympics before following his call to missionary work in China: "I believe God made me for a purpose. For China. But he also made me fast." Liddel's emphasis on "fast" still gives me goosebumps. But now, in my 50s, my running days outrun, I prefer to emphasize the word "also." Yes, God made Liddel fast. But God also called him to missionary work. God claims us and calls us to the "also" of a faithful life—a life where we can grieve and accept the loss of one call because God is already calling us to what is next.

Prayer: God who claims and calls us by name, help us accept our identity as your beloved people, embracing the meaningful lives to which you lead. Amen.

Teri

Day 37: Thursday

Serenity, Courage, Wisdom

*"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you."
— James 1:5*

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

I first learned the Serenity Prayer in the rooms of a 12-step program. It was presented like this: As we seek to turn our wills and our lives over to God, we ask the God of our understanding to help us discern between the things we can change and the things over which we are powerless. As we stop trying to be bigger, more powerful and more important than we are, we find freedom and relief from our addictions and compulsions.

I was surprised, years later, to learn that the prayer was written by Reformed theologian and Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr in the years leading up to World War II.

This fact caught me off guard because it revealed to me that I had unknowingly limited my acceptance of the things I cannot change to private, personal piety. I can accept that I can't control a loved one's drinking. I can accept the traffic on my way into work. I cannot accept larger systemic evils like racism, colonialism and misogyny.

But this prayer comes from the pen of Niebuhr, who was never one to constrain himself to private and personal piety. Niebuhr's words and works pertain to the public square.

Perhaps as we approach Holy Week, we would do well to be reminded that acceptance is not the same thing as endorsement. What does it mean to accept unjust realities, the crucifixions of our world? Can we accept something even as we actively work to change it?

Prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Ginna

Day 38: Friday

Pursuing What Is Good

*"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."
— Romans 8:28*

Romans 8:28 is a one of those passages that is read wrong more often than it is read right.

This misreading is largely because of how the King James Version translates this verse: "And we know that all things work together for good for them that love God." But that's not what the Greek text actually says. The Revised Standard Version gets a little closer: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love" God.

The result is two possible readings of Romans 8:28 that are different, and the difference is not subtle. In the first pos-

sible reading, God is in control of all things. If we believe God to be good, we must trust that anything that happens is good and right, even when everything inside us tells us otherwise. In the second possible reading, God does not have control of all events but is persistently at work in the world, bringing light out of darkness and hope out of hopelessness.

The verb translated as “works for” might better be translated “works with” or “cooperates with.” God cooperates in the world alongside every other force of reality. God is the force that is working for good.

God’s cooperative action in Romans 8:28 gives us a model for how our own acceptance might look. Perhaps acceptance means saying: *Given that this is reality – that I have lost what I thought I could not live without – I will follow in God’s footsteps and pursue what is good. I will cooperate for the sake of good, even in the face of evil.*

Maybe what Romans 8:28 is really trying to say is that God never gives up on hope.

Prayer: Persistent God, help me to accept and acknowledge reality for what it is without giving up on hope. Allow me to cooperate with you in the struggle for good. Amen.

Ginna

Day 39: Saturday

The Choice to Continue Living

“Job answered the Lord: . . . ‘I had heard of you by hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.’” — Job 42:1, 5-6

Everyone loves God’s speech from the whirlwind in Job, chapter 38. It’s beautiful poetry. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” God asks, “when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (vv. 4, 7).

Everyone loves the speech; no one knows quite what to make of Job’s response in chapter 42. “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Is Job’s answer penitent or defiant? Does Job repent *in* dust and ashes, as a sign of humility and mourning? Or does he repent *of* dust and ashes, shaking the dust off his feet at the unjust absurdity of this existence, in which we (and worse, those we love) suffer and die, and neither rhyme nor reason can be found.

Reading through the lens of grief, I wonder if Job’s answer is just plain acceptance. I wonder whether Job is doing the same thing so many of us have done after a loss: choosing to go on living because we have no satisfying alternative. I wonder if Job chooses to continue in relationship with God, not because God has provided a satisfying answer (let’s be honest — God hasn’t!), but because God has listened to Job’s complaint and not run away from the depths of his sorrow and anger.

In terms of theodicy, Job’s is not a satisfying answer. But it’s an honest one.

Remember, acceptance is not endorsement. It is the choice to continue living, even and especially when living feels like the hardest thing to do.

Prayer: God, help me to keep putting one foot in front of the other and to make the way by walking. Amen.

Ginna