

“Dare to Care: Attitude Toward Ourselves”  
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

In November of 2018, a Chinese researcher made the claim that he made the first genetically edited babies. The idea behind this is that the babies would be protected from disease through their DNA. This kind of research gives us hope for the future for avoiding some of the difficult diseases in our world. Here is a short clip about this story:

<https://youtu.be/C9V3mqswbv0>

We can debate the ethical implications of such research, but what is interesting to me is the desire underneath such research to help give us protection against the things that threaten our safety. The challenge of such a desire is that we try to apply the same principle to our emotions and actions. We learn from an early age that certain parts of ourselves are not acceptable and thus need to be hidden or repressed. And thus as Christina Feldman says (screen), “We tend to treat ourselves with a level of harshness and demand that we would be reluctant to inflict on anyone else, even our worst enemies. Even as we open our hearts to others, to receive and embrace them, we habitually judge and condemn ourselves.” This does not mean that we think that we are always perfect or that we never have bad qualities. It does not mean that we are always right or never make mistakes. What it does mean is that we learn to have compassion for ourselves just like we have compassion for others when they fail or are hurt. Instead of rejecting or hiding the shadow parts of ourselves, we see them as opportunities to allow God and others to help us.

The Apostle Paul saw this great wisdom in his own life and ministry as evidenced by his writings in 2 Corinthians 12. Corinth was a city of great competition. It was a city that wanted to compete with the glory of Rome. There was also the social structure of patronage which divided the society into separate social classes based on power and wealth.

Even in the church in Corinth there seemed to be a spirit of competition and division. There were people who considered the preaching of Paul to be inferior to the preaching of the so-called “super apostles.” There were those who questioned Paul’s credentials and teachings. They taught “the gospel of circumcision” while Paul taught that it was not necessary to be circumcised, i.e., become a Jew before joining the church. They wanted to follow the ways of the “glitzy” and charismatic preachers and teachers. They wanted to be led by the “best” preachers. They also wanted to have ecstatic and mystical visions or at least be led by preachers who had those experiences, as if such experiences were badges of honor to be worn and bragged about in public. If Paul was not fully grounded in his own soul and in his relationship with God, he might have tried to please and impress the people. He might have struggled to disown a part of himself. But that is not how Paul responded. He responded with an invitation to the Corinthians to the upside-down values of Jesus Christ.

But first he told them about his own ecstatic/mystical experience of going up into the third heaven. (read 2 Corinthians 12:2-4) This had happened to him fourteen years prior to the

writing of the letter. The third heaven was understood to be paradise. In the Jewish and Christian literature of the time this was understood to be part of the multilayered abode of God. The people of that time believed that heaven, the residence of God, was made up of several layers. The third layer was the one place where one could stand near God. The word paradise comes from the Persian language meaning “garden,” which was used in some Jewish literature to refer to the home of the departed righteous. Paul told the congregation in Corinth about his mystical experience of visiting this special place and experiencing God’s presence in that unique way not to brag, but to show them that he himself had some experiences of deep faith. In addition, Paul reminded them of all that he had done for the ministry of the gospel. He told them about all of this not to show off, but to remind the Christians in Corinth that he was more than qualified for this ministry. He was not inferior in his faith or his abilities. But, at the end, Paul reminded them that bragging and boasting were not Christian qualities. (Read 2 Corinthians 12:5-10) He told them about his gifts and about his weakness (the thorn in the flesh) to make sure that they knew that he was not denying any part of himself.

Self-compassion is very different from narcissism or arrogance. The true challenge of the gospel of Christ was to learn to trust in God and to see that God works best in our weaknesses and not just our strengths. God works through our faults and mistakes.

God is more visible for us in places of brokenness because that is when we truly allow God to work in our lives. The façade of success and the cultural allure of power and independence often block our ability to enter deeply into God’s presence because they keep us busy with the surface stuff of life, i.e., the ego stuff.

In her book *Boundless Compassion*, Joyce Rupp quotes Parker Palmer who wrote this (screen), “I now know myself to be a person with weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but embrace all of it...Others may say that ‘embracing one’s wholeness’ is just fancy talk for permission to sin, but again my experience is to the contrary. To embrace weakness, liability, and darkness as part of who I am gives that part less sway over me, because all it ever wanted was to be acknowledged as part of my whole self.”

How do we know when we are denying our weakness? The list is based on Richard Rohr’s teachings:

- If I beat myself up because I make mistakes or do something stupid. Then I’m trying to hang on to the false self who wants to think of myself as perfect.
- When my emotions go over the top at the mistakes that others make.
- When my plans are changed due to circumstances outside of my control and I feel rage and anger.
- When I think that the world revolves around me.
- When in community/family I get bothered about the inconvenience and difficulties of living with imperfect people, forgetting the fragility that is our common humanity.
- When I start to think that my idea of what is normal is the standard by which others should be judged.

- When I find myself wishing that I had the gifts of another without recognizing and celebrating the gifts that God has given me.

Paul acknowledged both his greatness and his weakness (the thorn in his flesh) and saw in the cross of Jesus an example of what the world considered to be weakness turns into wholeness and greater transformation for the world. Here is a clip by Jean Vanier about the importance of losing power in order to become whole. Vanier is a Canadian Catholic philosopher, theologian and humanitarian who in 1964 founded L'Arche, an international federation of communities in 37 countries for people with developmental disabilities and the people who assist them.

<https://youtu.be/raKH76eweYU>

Second service: In his 1992 book *From Brokenness to Community*, Vanier writes of Armando, an 8-year-old boy who could not walk or talk and had been abandoned in an orphanage: "That is the power of Armando. In some mysterious way, in all his brokenness, he reveals to us our own brokenness, our difficulties in loving, our barriers and hardness of heart. If he is so broken and so hurt and yet is still such a source of life, then I too am allowed to look at my own brokenness and to trust that I too can give life to others. ... I am allowed to be myself, with all my psychological and physical wounds, with all my limitations but with all my gifts too. And I can trust that I am loved just as I am, and that I too can love and grow."

We will close with a reflection from Rupp's book. "Look at your hands. Study them for their shape, color, and general appearance. You most probably do not think your hands are 'perfect' or look as good as you'd like them to look. Yet your life would be drastically altered without them. Can you also accept your less-than-perfect self with a similar recognition and appreciation? Write a note of kindness to the part of yourself that you least like."

Prayer:

"Source of Love, turn me around to look at myself, to see as you see, to love as you love, to accept as you accept, that I may approach myself with a heart of loving-kindness."  
Amen.