



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
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The Transformative And Healing Power Of Talking To Ourselves The Way God Does

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
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Many members of this faith community know that one of the defining chapters of my life took place thirty years ago when I was diagnosed with clinical depression and that that diagnosis was followed by eight years of intense psychotherapy. That period left me with some very important life skills, left me with a great deal of gratitude for psychotherapists, and it left me with a passionate belief in the absolute need for a certain percentage of us to avail ourselves of psychotherapeutic arts and care. I have had a life-long interest in how people throughout their lifetimes work with their own depression and despair and with the conditions that invite us to be depressed and despairing.

So into that lifelong interest of mine comes this morning's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures (Jeremiah 1: 4-10), about my favorite prophet, Jeremiah, often referred to as "the weeping prophet" because of his own depression and despair and the book of Lamentations associated with Jeremiah. And then there is that event that is recorded in this morning's gospel (Luke 4:21-30) where Jesus's entire hometown turned against him – which, of course, would be an occasion for at least despair for any one of us. Thirdly, there was the death this past week of one of my favorite scholars, resources, and activists, Howard Zinn, who as a humorous, joyful, social-action giant, counseled energetically and constantly against despair. All of this was undergirded by new reports about how school children are being given classes in school, training them to talk with themselves, to talk to themselves in a certain way as a proven instrument against adolescent depression.

Adolescence is tough. Few people in this room don't have an inner child or an inner teenager who still carries some scars from those tough years. Rates of depression increase dramatically when you are an adolescent, beginning at about age thirteen. Over the past three decades in the United States, depression in children has continued to grow, now affecting one quarter (25%) of all kids in the United States today. In fact, by high school, depression is one of the most common public health problems. Not only are depressive symptoms the cause of distress and interfere with functioning in life, depression is often recurrent, with first episodes taking place most often during adolescence. So, prevention of depression during adolescence may help to prevent suffering across a person's lifespan.

But there was this National Public Radio program I heard earlier this month describing a program called The Penn Resiliency Program centered at the University of Pennsylvania proving

that children can combat depression by being taught how actually to challenge their own negative thoughts.

Let's do a private inventory—how many of us have caught ourselves thinking often times in life, "Ugh, this will never work out," or "How could I be so stupid?" – voices from our basement. Researcher Jane Gillham of the [Penn Resiliency Program](#) says, "There's a pretty common bias in human beings to think about the negative." Studies show that the habit of reacting negatively actually can lead to depressive thinking. There's a lot of evidence that pessimistic thinking undercuts both achievement and well-being.

If a person tends to see small disappointments in life as catastrophes or failures, instead of as small disappointments in life they can become depressed or anxious. It's a common trick our minds can play on us, as children and as adults. But once thoughts are more aligned with reality, emotional responses can change for the better.

Gillham and her colleagues have developed a curriculum aimed at teaching middle-school students specific strategies to challenge these thought patterns and manage their own stress. It's backed by fifteen years of research that shows the benefits of this strategy. This resilience training can be as powerful as taking antidepressant medicines. Now, I'm not suggesting you all go home and stop taking your meds. [laughter] That's not what the sermon is about.

One of the schools the Resiliency Program is working in is New York City's West Harlem. There at KIPP Charter School, resilience training is squeezed in after the math class for fifth, sixth, and seventh-graders. The students learn about how "self-talk," the things we tell ourselves, can lead to different feelings when disappointing things happen.

Here is how it goes: The teacher hands each student a copy of the same cartoon strip. In the first picture of the cartoon strip there is an angry coach talking to a nervous player. The coach is pointing to a zero score, and the coach is clearly unhappy. In the second frame of the cartoon strip there is a kid with a thought bubble above his head or her head. The students first fill in the thought bubble with thoughts that would use the coach's anger to put themselves down—"the coach is angry; the coach must be angry at me; I'm no good"—is how the thought bubble goes the first time they fill it in.

Then they fill in the thought bubble with thoughts with a positive way to interpret the situation. This thought-emotion worksheet helps teach kids how their reactions to a scenario can shape their feelings and how, to a degree, they can control these reactions.

Now, lest you think I have turned into Norman Vincent Peal [laughter] this is not a sermon on the power of positive thinking (although I thought Norman Vincent Peal was a great guy). "It's not just about telling yourself positive things over and over," says Professor Gillham. That could be delusional. "It's reality-based," she says. She wants kids to learn to take a step back and reflect before reacting to disappointing events in their lives. These skills can help prevent depression, and they have powerful, powerful effects.

One study measured the effects of resilience training on middle-school students two years after the program ended. They looked for symptoms of depressive or negative thinking among the children. They found that symptoms of depressive thinking were 50 percent lower in the kids who had been through training than the kids who hadn't been through the training.

Of course, none of this is a magic bullet. Gillham says, "I don't want to imply that depression doesn't have biological causes which frequently it does." Clearly, there is evidence for a strong genetic component in much depression. And life can lead to episodes of depression, too, and all of us would be crazy, if we didn't get depressed about certain life events.

But, where depression can be controlled it is important to understand that the toll is huge. The annual cost to society is upward of \$56 billion. If there's evidence that behavioral strategies can buffer against the onset of depression, it's significant. Gillham says, "The evidence is starting to accumulate that these skills can help prevent depression." (Allison Aubrey, "Emotional Training Helps Kids Fight Depression," NPR, January 18, 2010)

Now, Howard Zinn and how he is connected with all of this. Howard Zinn is known for his best selling book, *A People's History of the United States* which told the behind-the-scenes truths about many of the conquests which conventional history books describe so proudly. Zinn was the teacher of Alice Walker and Marian Wright Edelman at Spellman College in Atlanta and he later taught thousands of students at Boston University prior to his death last Wednesday while he was swimming in Santa Monica, dying at age 87. Three years ago we had a dramatic reading performance of a play based on his work right here at All Saints – a magnificent source for self-criticism of the United States.

In reading several obituaries and tributes I was struck for the first time at how passionately Howard Zinn wanted all people, particularly people who are interested in social action – how interested he was in wanting all people to self-talk about their own despair over how the world is. To put it another way, he frequently wanted us to change our thought bubbles up here about our reactions to how not well the world is going.

He wrote, "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. Hope is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize in life, what we choose to emphasize in this complex history of ours will literally determine our lives. What you emphasize is determinative. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some eutopian future. The future is an infinite succession of gifts, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us—just to live defiantly as human beings should live is itself a marvelous victory." (Howard Zinn, "The Optimism of Uncertainty," *The Nation*, September 2, 2004 <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040920/zinn>]

Now, Jeremiah. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah railed in defiance of all that was bad around him and as a result had a very difficult life. His family disowned him, his brothers dug a pit and threw him in it, and I love him all the way through this saga told in the biblical book of Jeremiah because of his intimate relationship with God. Jeremiah was intimate with God because he loved God and was secure enough with God to rail at God. He could get intensely angry at God. My favorite explosion that Jeremiah had with God was when he called God “a deceitful wadi.” Now, a wadi is a brook in the deserts of the Middle East and during spring rains they can swell with water and you’re so excited because you know where the wadi is, or you live near the wadi, or you know how to get to the wadi to quench your thirst in the desert. And then you go in late summer and that thing has dried up to nothing, there is not even a trace of a riverbed. Jeremiah pointed at one and said, “God, that is what you are. I can’t count on you.”

Jeremiah was so depressive that his writings or writings in his spirit fill up an entire book of the Bible called Lamentations (beautiful poetry). But Jeremiah took a page out of the Resilience project on self-talk. This is the way he dug his way out of the pit of depression.

He said,
“Yet this I call to mind,” (in other words, “this I have in my thought bubble”)
“and therefore I have hope.
So this is what I’ve called to mind
because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,
for God’s compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is Your faithfulness.
Lamentations 3: 21-23

A colleague of mine commented earlier that we sure were having a lot of Bible reading today, more than we normally have at All Saints, and that’s because both the Hebrew scriptures and the First Corinthian passage from St. Paul are two classic poems in scripture. They are beautiful not only because of their poetry but because they work. They work when we lose our way, when we are feeding ourselves destructive thoughts in our own thought bubbles. Here can come these poems to call us back to our way.

I would recommend that you simply take page six of the liturgy home with you today where these passages appear in print. Just hear what Jeremiah heard God say to him and what he repeated to himself over and over again, God is saying, “Jeremiah, before I formed you in the womb I chose you.” Put your name there because it’s meant just as much for you as it is for Jeremiah. “Before you were born I dedicated you, I appointed you as a prophet to your nation and to all the world” and I said, “But Sovereign God, I do not know how to speak, I’m too young. “ God said, “Don’t say ‘I’m too young.’ Now, go wherever I send you and say whatever I command you and don’t fear any body for I am with you to protect you.” This is God who is speaking to you.

And, St. Paul is telling us the thing that lasts forever. Three things abide: Faith, Hope and Love. But the greatest of these is Love. And the first thing Paul says about love is that it is patient. God is patient with you and me, and God is kind to you and me, and God wants to use you and me

as an instrument to replace, if we can, the thought bubbles in other peoples minds so that they know how loved they are.

When you and I become a part of God's Resilience Project we can change the world. That's why I have to be in church on Sunday because this Table is the centerpiece of God's Resilience Project where God tells you and me how much God has chosen you and me and how much God loves you and me, and how much God wants to send you and me and how we are not to be afraid of any one. And if you and I will self-talk to ourselves the way God talks to you and me, then you and I just may be able to save the life of a child, a teenager, or another human being.

Amen.