

What Does 'Doing All You Can' Look Like?

Friends, the Love of God knits us together as a community of faith through both long-time and newer connections. And that Love of God brings us together for this time of reflection. On this Labor Day weekend, we give thanks for our weekly opportunity to gather in sacred time and space away from our daily rhythms of work and rest.

Let's wonder together today: what does 'doing all you can' look like?

- What can we each do? And what can't each of us do?
- What's the difference between ability and capacity?
- What about when you recognize that all your doings (all your efforts) are actually not meeting any need or having positive impact?
- What about when you are either unable without capacity to meet a need or positively impact a situation?

Let us pray: O God – loving companioning Presence – grant us serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow journeyers, I often hear comments about ability and capacity that name lack or limit in oneself and abundance or seeming limitlessness in another.

Ability is skill or aptitude (whether natural or acquired).

Capacity is potential space for experience.

We may hear ourself or another (with a look of retreat in our eyes or posture) comment on our own ability: "You know, I am just no very good at that." Or we may hear ourself or another (with an audibly weary sigh) comment on our own capacity: "You know, I just don't have the bandwidth for that. There's too much on my plate."

And yet, when it comes to noticing (or sometime, more accurately, assuming) about others, we may hear ourself or another (with a look or tone of admiration or possibly jealousy) comment on someone else's apparent ability: "They are so great at that." Or we may hear ourself or another (again with a look of admiration or jealousy) comment on someone's assumed capacity: "I don't know how they do it all!"

In her book *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, psychologist and professor Dr. Kristin Neff offers an exercise she calls "Seeing Yourself As You Are." She invites the reader to list several five valued traits for which you are above average, five valued traits for which you are average, and five valued traits for which you are below average. This exercise invites us to assess ourselves honestly and accept ourselves as complex beings.

Having planted the seed of Neff's "Seeing Yourself As You Are" exercise, we will return to engage with it related to ourselves in a moment. Let's first place it in conversation with Moses and his encounter with a moment of discernment around ability and capacity. We heard:

"The messenger of God appeared to Moses in a blazing fire from the midst of a thornbush. Moses saw – 'The bush is ablaze with fire, and yet it isn't consumed!' Moses said, 'Let me go over and look at this remarkable sight – and see why the bush doesn't burn up!'"

Here is my hope today for each of us as individuals and in our common life as merging congregation – that we would be like a burning thornbush – ablaze and yet not consumed. I have often said of each of my primary vocations (that of mother and that of pastor) that my work energizes me as much as it exhausts me.

When we invest our emotional heart, intellect, gut, spirit, and physical energy; we can expect to feel depleted.

Yet, if we invest ourselves in endeavors that hit somewhere near our sweet spot of both ability and capacity (perhaps one more than the other), we will also be replenished by experiences of joy, satisfaction, confidence, and hope.

This was the way in which God (the voice of Love) called to Moses:

“The cry of the children of Israel has reached me, and I have watched how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Now, go! I will send you to Pharaoh, to bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”

‘But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?’

God answered, ‘I will be with you...’”

I wonder what fueled Moses’ expression of inadequacy. Did he believe that he lacked ability to lead or did he believe that he did not have the capacity (that is, the space for that experience)? I wonder if it was faith that God would be with him that infused Moses with the grace to trust that he could, in fact, respond to the particular need of his people?

In a paraphrase of Psalm 105 by Nan Merrill in her book *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*, the author writes about self-awareness (that is keeping honest, caring company with oneself) in an encouraging and invitational way. If you’re comfortable doing so, I invite you to hold your hands in an open posture – perhaps resting on your lap, and to close your eyes as you welcome these words to wash over you:

“Gentle us, O Compassionate One, that we tread the Earth lightly and with grace.

Spreading peace, goodness, and love, without harm to any creature.

For in gentle serenity is strength and assurance; confusion and suspicion find no home here.

In all things may we be grateful, our hearts open to joy.

O Mighty Counselor, speak to us within our hearts; let your Voice be heard.

And as we listen and heed your Way, joy will be our song of thanks.

As You lead us into the Silence, we become friends with solitude.”

You're welcome to open your eyes if you wish. Let's return to Dr. Neff's "Seeing Yourself As You Are" exercise. I engaged in an abbreviated experience of it for myself. And I invite you to engage with it in an abbreviated way this morning. I will leave some pauses for your thinking. And I hope that each of us will return to it for the good it will do in building self-compassion and the good that self-compassion will do in ripples outward.

In what valued traits am I above average? I came up with these:

- Following through on tasks for which I have taken responsibility
- Engaging with a new person

In what valued traits are you above average? *[pause]*

In what valued traits am I just average? I came up with these:

- Sensing what another is feeling
- Showing appreciation in a way that another will receive

In what valued traits are you just average? *[pause]*

In what valued traits am I below average? I came up with these:

- Carefully considering how my words might land before speaking
- Accepting and moving with an unplanned flow

In what valued traits are you below average? *[pause]*

I invite us to take this self-compassion exercise seriously and extend it further into our moments and our days.

Let's dwell for a moment in the reading from Romans. And the question for today came from this reading because of the phrase "do all you can." I am a firm nonbeliever in the phrase 'give it 110%.' So, the Scripture did not say 'do more than you can' nor did it say 'do less than you can.'

We heard, "*Love one another with the affection of sisters and brothers. Try to outdo one another in showing respect.*" Do you have ability and capacity for developing the loyal affection of siblings with other humans? In each of these, we may be above average, average, or below average.

We heard, "*Rejoice in hope; be patient under trial; persevere in prayer.*" While they are certainly not synonymous, do you have ability and capacity for hopefulness, patience, perseverance?

We heard, "*Look on the needs of God's holy people as your own; be generous in offering hospitality.*" Do you have ability and capacity for generous hospitality toward others from your heart?

We heard, "*Bless your persecutors - bless them and don't curse them.*" Do you have ability and capacity to recognize that God is somehow fully present in your persecutor even if not embodying that presence toward you?

We heard, "*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*" Not all have these abilities and capacities. Do you have ability and capacity to embody compassion through raw, raw rejoicing and weeping with another.

We heard, "*Have the same attitude toward everyone.*" Woo! Do you have ability and capacity for fairness?

We heard, *“Do all you can to be at peace with everyone.”* Do you have ability and capacity to make peace in the spaces where you move?

And finally, we heard, *“Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by doing good.”* Do you have ability and capacity for love that is so strong and so influential that it can overcome evil?

May we continue to learn about our abilities and capacities and stay radically open to discerning our particular way forward in doing not more than we can and not less than we can, but all that we can – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
A Merging Congregation @ People’s Park (Bayport, MN)
September 3, 2023 (14th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Romans 12: 9-21, Exodus 3: 1-15