

“Beginning with Ease”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading excerpt from *Stubborn Grace: Faith, Mental Illness, and Demanding a Blessing*
by Kate Landis

The Dalai Lama says that when we make a mistake, we need to ask, “Can I love this too?” Can I love all of me, even the peevish parts? Even the insecure bits, the anxious bits? Because I can love my niece even when she sticks her hand in my cup of coffee and gets mad and hollers at me for it. It’s easy. I don’t expect her to be perfect. Can I extend that understanding to myself? Can I love my anxiety too? My depression too? My desire to seem like I have my [act] together even when I’m freaking out? Can I love all of me?

Sermon

I have to admit that I sometimes struggle to be kind to myself. The list of expectations I carry is long, and I’m often quick to judge myself when I fall short.

Here’s a recent example. Some of you know that we had a snafu with the live stream during the Christmas Eve service. The sound worked fine—but the screen was black the entire time. No one watching could see a thing.

I was responsible for the livestream that evening so that Bryce could be present as part of the congregation, and we didn’t have any other backup for our AV needs. Even though I had diligently tested it all out the day before, something went wrong.

I didn’t learn about the blank screen until after the service ended—when I saw the comments in the live chat and heard about the text messages staff were receiving, including myself, during worship. As soon as I realized what had happened, my stomach dropped. The voice of self-judgment rose up quickly. I felt like I had ruined Christmas Eve for those hoping to participate in worship from afar. I felt like I had failed. I was supposed to have led an evening of beauty and meaning and instead, this voice told me, I had let people down.

On the drive to my in-laws' house that night, I replayed every step of the setup trying to figure out what went wrong. I stayed quiet in the car—riding with my spouse and child—while my self-criticism quickly built a wall between us.

Rationally, I knew I had done my best. I even knew that this shouldn't have rested entirely on my shoulders. But knowing that didn't silence the inner critic, at least in those moments with the mishap still fresh in my mind.

As personal as that story is, I know I'm not alone in this. Being compassionate toward ourselves can be surprisingly difficult.

Judging ourselves harshly is a common human pattern. Our brains are wired to focus on the negative. It doesn't mean there is something wrong with us just that we are human. And blaming ourselves for having an inner critic only deepens the suffering.

Yet, we have felt the impacts of self-criticism. When we lack compassion for ourselves, we often begin telling ourselves false stories—about our worth, our lovability, and our capacity to grow and change. And it can be hard to stop the pattern.

The Christian scholar Jim Wilhoit writes, “Self-criticism can become the daily liturgy of our lives—hour after hour we confess our foolishness, despise our gifts, deny our strengths, and fail to speak truth in love to ourselves.”¹

The tendency to judge ourselves can become habituated. It can even become a mindless, recurring backdrop to our daily lives.

I'm guessing many of us have experienced something like this in much smaller, everyday ways. Maybe you say the wrong thing in a meeting or at the dinner table, and hours later—sometimes days later—you're still replaying the moment. You think of the better response you should have given, the tone you should have used, the version of yourself you wish had shown up.

The moment itself may have passed quickly. But inside, the loop keeps playing. The inner critic insists on revisiting the scene, pointing out every perceived flaw.

Nothing new is learned in those moments. No repair is being made. Instead, the mind tightens, the body grows tense, and we quietly withdraw—from others, and often from ourselves.

¹ “Self-Compassion as a Christian Spiritual Practice.” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 12 (1): 71–88.

Over time, this kind of self-judgment can become so familiar that we hardly notice it anymore. It becomes the background noise of our inner lives.

Yet, judging ourselves and ignoring our own suffering doesn't serve a greater good. Self-criticism tends to close us off—from ourselves and from others—leading to isolation rather than connection. Self-criticism can become a form of self-absorption.

This doesn't mean we ought not acknowledge where we need to grow. Self-compassion doesn't mean avoiding our shadows. It means facing the parts of ourselves we'd rather hide—with honesty and care. We can recognize harm, take responsibility, and seek change, but we can do so without condemning ourselves.

Self-compassion doesn't eliminate accountability—it changes the spirit in which accountability happens.

I've seen this dynamic play out very clearly in the work of growing in racial awareness and accountability.

I've observed that when a white person is told by a person of color that harm has been caused—often through ignorance, assumption, or unexamined bias—the response can sometimes swing quickly into intense self-criticism. There is a rush of shame: I should know better. I've failed. I'm part of the problem.

While that reaction may appear to be accountability, it often has the opposite effect. When someone becomes consumed by self-condemnation, the focus turns inward. Attention shifts to personal discomfort or fear of being seen as “bad.” And in that state, it becomes much harder to stay present or to take in the learning that is being offered.

I've also witnessed something different happen when self-compassion is present. When someone can tolerate their discomfort with tenderness, they are more able to hear what has been named. They can acknowledge harm without defensiveness, seek amends where possible, and make changes in behavior moving forward.

In those moments, self-compassion doesn't erase responsibility. It creates the conditions for responsibility to be carried with honesty and for transformation to take root.

Meeting the moment with compassion means seeking understanding and offering grace—to others and to ourselves. If compassion is something we seek to cultivate, then we must include ourselves in that practice.

The difficulty is—how do we do this when the inner critic can be so loud?

Our spiritual traditions offer us important lessons here.

First, compassion begins with understanding.

The Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: “Compassion is not an idea or something we can imagine. It is a mental formation that has an immediate result in action of body, speech, or mind. It is rooted in understanding. When we understand why we suffer we can be compassionate to ourselves. When we understand how others suffer then we can be compassionate to them.”²

There is a reality of suffering that must be perceived and understood. Compassion begins when we see suffering with clarity. Reflecting on my experience right after the Christmas Eve service, I can see how I was suffering from my own criticism which pulled me into isolation and disappointment.

Having compassion brings clarity and self-understanding. And when we understand suffering—our own and another’s—the heart opens.

In his poem, “Call Me By My True Names,” Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion.*

We cannot stay open to the suffering of others if we are closed off to our own. When we meet ourselves with compassion, we keep the door of the heart open.

² Thich Nhat Hanh: *Essential Writings*

Our traditions also teach us that self-compassion isn't indulgent or optional spiritual work. It is essential for our spiritual well-being and the well-being of others.

The Buddhist teacher, Oren Jay Sofer writes: "Developing compassion for the world includes turning our attention inward with a tender gaze and making space for all that we feel. The more tenderness we have for our pain, the stronger our resilience and the more compassion we have for others' pain."³

Perhaps you have noticed this yourself. Regarding yourself with tenderness opens the heart so that compassion can flow more readily to others.

This same wisdom is woven into Christian teachings. The commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves is only possible to fulfill *if* we truly love ourselves. Chanequa Walker-Barnes writes, "We are supposed to be kind and gentle, caring and nurturing, empowering and forgiving of ourselves. If we are unable to do this, ultimately we may be unable to do it for our neighbors."⁴

Love and compassion aren't meant to only flow outward.

Showing yourself compassion means knowing yourself as part of the greater whole - as inseparable from the reality that encompasses all. This is interbeing, the universe, the great mystery, God.

The theologian Henri Nouwen warned that the greatest trap in our spiritual lives is self-rejection.⁵ This is because there is a deeper truth than the claim that we are too broken or that the story of our unworthiness is the whole story. The deeper truth is that we are beloved and we belong to something larger than ourselves.

Each of us is part of this greater whole and worthy of love, even our own love for ourselves.

Kate Landis asks: Can I love all of me? Such a simple yet profound question. Can I love all of me?

Loving the whole of ourselves starts with self-acceptance.

³ *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis with Courage, Integrity & Love*

⁴ *Sacred Self-Care: Daily Practices for Nurturing Our Whole Selves*

⁵ *Life of the Beloved Spiritual Living in a Secular World*

Jim Wilhoit describes self-acceptance as a virtue. It means, “deeply perceiving and coming to terms with one’s vulnerability and brokenness, appreciating the unique gifts and traits one possesses, and seeing oneself as a beloved child of God.”⁶

We can come to understand our own beauty and brokenness and behold it all as worthy of dignity, as sacred and holy.

When we are gentle with ourselves, we know ourselves as part of the whole. The compassion we long to offer the world begins with ourselves. It begins with cultivating the kind of heart that can recognize and respond to our own needs as well as the needs of others.

This wisdom matters most in how we carry it into our own lives.

As we enter a new year, what might it look like for you to meet what’s ahead with an open, compassionate heart? Instead of bracing yourself for what’s coming, how might you stay tender and receptive?

This kind of inner work is part of our spiritual journey. Instead of the liturgy of self-criticism, we can practice a liturgy of self-compassion.

One simple practice to start with is noticing when it’s your inner critic speaking. In these moments, pause and wonder, what would compassion sound like right now?

You might also imagine how someone who loves you unconditionally would see you. A friend, a sibling, a spouse, the Divine. What would they say to you? How would they treat you in moments of failure or doubt?

It’s from this place—of inner nurturing and care—that we’re able to move outward and share our gifts, including compassion, with the world.

Imagine if we offered ourselves the same compassion we long to offer—and receive—from others. Imagine if self-compassion weren’t just an individual practice, but a communal one.

What kind of community might we become? What kind of world would we inhabit?

⁶ “Self-Compassion as a Christian Spiritual Practice.” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 12 (1): 71–88.

In my imagining, we would be cultivating fertile ground for compassion to grow. We would be learning from one another how to be gentle and care for one another. We would be more ready to meet suffering—not with fear or defensiveness—but with presence.

Within our community, we would continue becoming a congregation shaped by tenderness and courage, a refuge for cultivating compassion in the face of all the harshness and bitterness that is all too present these days.

The poet Stanley Miller Williams writes:

Have compassion for everyone you meet,
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.⁷

So let us meet ourselves with compassion and with gentleness.
Let us meet the world in its brokenness and its beauty with hearts open and ready to offer
presence, to give generously, and to act courageously for more loving, just, and peaceful days
ahead.

So may it be.

⁷ From *The Ways We Touch: Poems*