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How Bad Are We?

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How Bad Are We?

Most of us are willing and able to consider our shortcomings if the question is raised, whether directly or by some kind of survey. But if someone asks about how good we are, we are likely to pause, and consider carefully an answer that will seem neither proud nor to be avoiding a response. Our first thoughts about ourselves are more often critical than positive; we have a tendency to suspect that something is wrong with us, more than to expect that we will uncover some new treasure within if we look honestly into our hearts.

To gain facility in our ability to recognize what is right with us, we need to deal with any predisposition towards negativity that might be stored away in a closet of our interior household. By this time in our lives we have often been hurt; we have suffered sicknesses and setbacks, pains in our bodies, contradictions in our minds, and conflicts in our spirits. Most of us spontaneously think of pain and suffering as "bad." Since we all have many experiences in our lives that we identify as negative, we can easily assume that we ourselves are somehow in the wrong. Painful feelings might be transformed into abiding thoughts and not-quite-conscious beliefs that we ourselves are "out of order." Certainly we are not perfect; we are probably "sinners" in the sense of sometimes acting contrary to our own consciences. But we have a responsibility to ourselves and to the persons with whom we live and work to recognize and acknowledge our basic goodness.

Pain, confusion, distress, and every form of suffering: none of these say anything about who we are. Like the dust on the floor, we deal with such realities, but they do not touch upon on who we are or how we are or who we are in process of becoming. We are well made, functional and functioning, whether we feel a cool refreshing breeze or have a fit of sneezing. We have not oriented ourselves towards destroying one another. We might be overjoyed at one event, and hurt and confused by another, but our behavior is not that of animals that act on instinct, or of humans who prey on others. We do not wish harm to ourselves or those around us. When we look at our experience, we will see that most of what we do and what we avoid matches our sense for what is fair, right, and good. We have high ideals, even if we do not always carry them out. At times, we experience disappointment and perhaps guilt about some of our actions or inactions, but our inclination, like every healthy plant, is towards the light.

The question about how good we are is much more than a practice of "mental health". If we enter into reflective prayer, and give our attention to some of the many gifts of God at work in us, we will find ourselves in the best of company by agreeing that, as persons created in God's image and likeness, we are "very good!" (Genesis 1:31). With such recognition, we can continue to grow and to improve in our care for one another and for our world with much greater facility than if we focus our attention on the question, "How bad are we?"