MAKING PEACE WITH OUR DISAPPOINTMENTS AND REGRETS – FCCH, May 11, 2025

Today we are beginning a series of sermons on emotions. In this time of turmoil in our country, we are forced to process awful news every single day, news that is discouraging and causes our blood pressure to rise. If you’re like me, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, especially when we join the news of the day with the challenges that we are experiencing in our lives. Karla and I are hoping that spending some time looking at our emotions will help each of us feel better, to be more grounded, and to have more energy to live as person’s who are loving and compassionate. Today we begin by looking at making peace with our disappointments and regrets.

Disappointment is most simply defined as unmet expectations. The more significant the expectations, the more significant the disappointment. Some of us have experienced disappointment because the dreams we had for our lives, like being a parent, or a particular career path, or even the dreams we had for what our golden years living in a beautiful town in the mountains would look like that have not worked out like we hoped they would.

These dreams are often the kind of expectations that are unexamined and unexpressed. When we develop expectations, we paint a picture in our head of how things are going to be, not based on reality, necessarily, but based on our desired outcome. This movie in our mind is wonderful. But no one else knows their parts, their lines, or even what the story looks like in our minds. When this movie in our mind fails to play out in real life, we feel disappointment.

I’ve dealt with unexamined and unexpressed expectations in my own life. For instance, I recently moved back to the tiny house community for the third time. It took me a lot of time to realize that I had moved there the first two times with the unexpressed expectation that everyone would love me and everyone would invite me to everything. Now, I understand that that is not going to be the case, and I’ve been able to let go of that expectation.

The other kind of disappointment is borne from examined and expressed expectations. This might look like applying for a job that we are totally qualified for, putting ourselves out there, and then experiencing disappointment when someone less qualified gets the job.

One way to minimize disappointment, of course, is to lower our expectations. Some additional ways to deal with our disappointment include using what author Mel Robbins calls the Let Them theory. The Let Them theory is based on the fact that we cannot control others, and we don’t need to put our emotional health in the hands of others. For instance, if someone doesn’t invite us to an event, we can choose to be disappointed or we can choose to say to ourselves “Let them. Let them have their party.” Or if someone has an idea different than ours, we can let go of the situation with the phrase “Let them.” The author Jefferson Fisher also suggests using the phrase “I wasn’t meant to be there” or “I wasn’t meant to do that” when we feel disappointed. Tracy, my spiritual director, often suggests that we reframe our disappointment by asking ourselves “In light of this, what is the invitation being offered to me?”

Regrets, on the other hand, are experiences that we see as being caused by our decisions or actions. Some regrets are small r regrets, like I really wish I had not eaten two pieces of carrot cake at dinner, and some regrets are capital R regrets, like I wish I had spent more time talking with my parents and learning about their life stories. I’ve asked a few people this week about their regrets, and I’ve heard things like “I wish I wouldn’t have spent so much time worrying about what other people think,” and “I regret bullying a few kids growing up,” and “I wish I’d been less committed to work and more committed to my family.”

When I think about regrets, I still resonate with what Bronnie Ware, a hospice nurse, wrote in her book “Regrets of the Dying” many years ago. Ms. Ware says that there were five common themes that surfaced over and over in her care with people who were in their final stage of life. These were:

1. I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn’t worked so hard.
3. I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I’d stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish I’d let myself be happier. Now days, I think we might say it this way: “I wish I’d realized that I have agency, and I don’t need to live as a victim.”

The big questions, of course, is “What do we do with our regrets?” It seems to me that there are three possible places for us to land.

1. The first is to look at our regrets and decide if we need to forgive ourselves or someone else. Forgiveness is often found in acknowledging that we, and others, were most likely doing the best we could at that moment.
2. The second place we can land is to decide if we can heal the regret by apologizing or reaching out in some way, even if it feels awkward.
3. The third place we can land is to acknowledge that some things just are what they are. Sometimes, our challenge is to make peace with the fact that we did the best we could at that particular moment.

The meditation teacher Cory Muscara offers some insights into this process of letting go that I find helpful. He writes: “The paradox of letting go is that we first need to move closer to the thing we’re trying to move away from. We need to go deep and get very clear on why we’re holding on and how it’s still serving us to hold on. And usually the service it is providing is that it allows us to avoid facing the fear of something new. Cory also says that it is important to contemplate a compelling alternative. Ask yourself: What is the kind of life I could experience once I do let go? What would I feel, who might I meet, what might I be able to do, and what kind of person would I be? The more compelled you feel about moving toward a new reality, the less you tend to worry about losing the security of what you’ve been holding on to.

As you may know, our pastor, Karla Miller, will soon walk the Camino de Santiago later this month. It is a huge undertaking, and she has been training for it the past few months. One of the traditions for the pilgrims who walk the Camino is that many carry a stone in their pocket. These stones often represent the burdens, emotional struggles, and the disappointments and regrets that they bring with them on their journey. Some leave their stones at various places along the route, and many leave their rocks at the Cruz de Ferro, which is pictured on the cover of our bulletin. Many pilgrims believe that if you put your sorrow on a stone, you can unburden yourself when you put the stone down.

 What disappointment or regret do we need to let go of today? What would you write on your rock? Maybe this is the day to not only learn from our disappointment and regrets, but to also let go of them.

I love the way in which the minister Rob Bells sums all of this up when he says: “Whenever I start to beat myself up for not being good enough at life, or I’m drowning in disappointment or regret, I look at the word STUDENT, which is tattooed on my hand, and I gradually find self-compassion and self-forgiveness. Remembering that I am, and will always be, a STUDENT gets me through a lot.

So dear friends, as you and I journey to making peace with our disappointments and regrets, may we remember that we are also still STUDENTS, and may we also remember that the spirit of Christ, the love who loves us and wants the best for us, is with us each step of the way, giving us the courage to do what we need to do. Amen.

May we remember that the spirit of Christ is with us, giving us the courage to do what we know we need to do. Amen.