

THE GRACE OF AWARENESS

Week #2 of the 3-Week Series, "Stop Fixing Yourself"

May 2, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center! Welcome to the church of positive, practical Christianity! I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, senior minister, and so glad that you are joining us!

Just want to let you know that I'll be starting a new class on a book that really changed my life: *Discover the Power within You* by Eric Butterworth. It will begin on May the 11th, and it will run for 4 weeks. And I hope you'll join us! Of course, that's going to be by Zoom. And just go on the website and register; would love to have you join me for those wonderful classes.

Also a reminder: we're all getting geared up and excited about Sunday, June the 6th, when we start back LIVE in the Sanctuary: 11 a.m. our Youth & Family Ministry will be on, too. I'll be beginning a new "Songs of Life" series, so we're going to kick it up! The band's going to be here; we're going to have a great time! So tell everybody, and we look forward to seeing you Sunday, June the 6th, 9 and 11 a.m.

Right now, we are going to get into a time of prayer and meditation. And to prepare us for that experience, we will now listen as the choir sings "Surely the Presence."

Unity of Phoenix Choir sings "Surely the Presence"

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place
I can see God's mighty power and God's grace
I can feel the brush of angels' wings
I see glory on each face
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to join me in a time of prayer and meditation. A time to go within and let go of everything in the outer world, and focus on the inner. I invite you to close your outer eyes, take in a mindful breath. And, as you release it, gently begin to move your awareness within. Take in another deep breath, gently letting it go, and focusing on your heart space: in that space of God's unconditional love. That place where we are one with the Cosmos. Where we are one with the All. That each and every one of us is an important part of the greater whole.

We know, God, that we are all connected in spirit: in the great, unconditional love that was planted in our very souls when we were created. And that God's love for us is deep and strong and abiding. And when we live from this place of love – when we share our love with everyone we meet – we make the world a more loving place.

In this quiet, still place within, we recognize that God is all there is. That God is all there is! And we participate in that; we are part of the divine Spirit of the universe. In this quiet, still place, we move more deeply into the silence, as we feel the oneness with each and every one ... as we know that each of us has come here for an important contribution that is ours to do. And, God, you guide us in that; you show us the way, so that we can come here to make the world a better place.

As we breathe in another deep breath and release it slowly, we move more deeply into the silence: into that place of oneness with all ... into that place of God's unconditional love ... to that place where we know – without a doubt – that we are making the world a better place, because we bring our love here.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we recognize the Spirit of God's love within.

SILENCE

Sweet Spirit, we're so grateful for this time away from the outer world. Of moving within and feeling your presence within. We know, God, that we have many blessings; we are so grateful for all of them. Thank you for creating us. Thank you for giving us these amazing lives we live in. Thank you for vitalizing every cell, and bringing us back to wholeness. We say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Thank you, Rev. Lori; that was a beautiful meditation. Really appreciate it!

So this man was lost in the desert, and he was moving really slowly – barely could stay on his feet – when, suddenly, he saw at the top of the hill another man on a camel with a bunch of neckties draped over his arm. And he said to the guy, *"Water; water! Please! Do you have any water?"* The second guy said, *"No; I don't have any water, but I can sell you a tie for \$15."* He said, *"I don't need a tie! I just need some water!"* He said, *"I'll give you a real good deal: two for \$25."* He said, *"No! No ties! Can you just tell me where to get some water?"* And then the guy on the camel said, *"Alright. I'll tell you. Just go back the way I came about two miles; you'll see a really big tent. There'll be a guy standing in front of it; it's a restaurant. They've got plenty of water."* So the first guy walks the two miles and finds the man in front of the tent. Exhausted, he says, *"Water! Do you have any water?"* And this new guy says, *"Yeah; I've got plenty of water."* And the first guy says, *"Well, thank goodness! Can I have some water?"* And the third guys said, *"Sorry; we don't serve anyone not wearing a tie."* [Simulates "rim shot" drum roll]

Did you see that one coming? I thought that was fabulous! [Laughs]

So our homework last week was to practice choosing to be unconditionally happy, no matter what happens. If you didn't get the promotion, still choose to be unconditionally happy. Going through some financial struggles? Choose to be unconditionally happy. Going through some family conflict? Choose to be unconditionally happy. Even if it's a health challenge, always choose to be unconditionally happy.

I choose to be unconditionally happy! Let's say that together: *"I choose to be unconditionally happy."*

And the reason that is important is because the fact is that you – and only you – are the one that determines how happy or unhappy you are in your life.

Abraham Lincoln once said, *"Most people are as happy as they make up their minds to be."* That means that we're as happy as we choose to be; we're as happy as we decide to be, and allow ourselves to be.

So on a scale of 1 to 10 – 10 being highest – how happy have you made up your mind to be today? How happy are you choosing and allowing yourself to be happy right now? Because the fact is: if you're not feeling as happy as you'd like to be, it is because we have been conditioned to some false beliefs and rigid rules around what it takes to be happy.

You know, everyone's underlying definition of happiness is this: Happiness equals getting everything I want. Happiness equals everything going my way. And when we operated out of such a rigid and false and unrealistic mindset, is it any surprise we set ourselves up for frustration, disappointment and unhappiness?

The truth is that we were all born happy! We were all born joyful and peaceful and loving. We were born divine beings of light. Happiness is our natural state! But we have learned to be unhappy. We have been conditioned to be unhappy ... which means we can unlearn from being unhappy! And we can recondition our minds to being happier.

I love when it says in Scripture that we must become as a child to enter the kingdom of heaven. We must come back to that natural state of joyfulness, as a child – the way we were born – that is in our spirit. And that is the way we experience the fullness of the kingdom of heaven.

Buddhists say that the only thing that causes suffering in our lives and our world, and unhappiness, is our attachment to things: our attachment to the idea that our happiness necessarily depends on us having something we don't currently have. Or happiness depends on necessarily holding on – and not losing – something that we have. And it could be money; it could be power. It could be approval or validation, or the need to be right. Whatever it is – whatever we think that we are so attached to that it will necessarily make us happy, and without it we will not be happy – that is the thing that causes the most suffering in our lives.

So what are the things that you're attached to? What are the things that you feel that you must have or you cannot be happy? Who are the people? What are the things? And what are the beliefs that you hold on to tightly? Because the tighter we hold on – and the tighter we're attached – the further it takes us away from peace. And the further it takes us away from our natural state of happiness.

Today is Week #2 in our three-week series called "Stop Fixing Yourself," (based on the book) by Anthony De Mello. And it's really about being aware and eliminating those false, rigid rules of happiness so we can be more authentically happy. It is about not fixing ourselves so we can be happy with who we are: happy in our own skin, and happy living the life we are meant to live.

A disciple went to his spiritual guru and said, *"Can you give me a word of wisdom? You know: something to guide me throughout my day."* Now the master was going through his day of silence, so he just took a notepad and wrote the word "awareness." When the disciple saw it, he said, *"Well, that's a bit brief; can you just expand on that a little bit?"* So the guru took the pad and wrote, *"Awareness. Awareness. Awareness."* And the student nodded and said, *"Yeah; but what does that mean exactly?"* And the guru wrote, *"Awareness. Awareness. Awareness means Awareness."*

In the same way that attachment causes suffering, awareness actually creates freedom and liberation and peace. Awareness doesn't sound that powerful, but awareness is absolutely the first step in liberating us from our own attachments: freeing ourselves from our limiting beliefs or negative thinking. And it releases us in the areas where we're stuck and the things that are holding us back from truly living. Eckhart Tolle said, *"If you want to transform your life, the absolute first thing you need to do is to increase your awareness."*

You know, when we practice awareness, what it does: it brings us to the present. It helps us stay conscious. It helps us be tuned in to ourselves and what's going on around us. We are more engaged. We are more embracing. We are more alive and present to ourselves. And it really – the more we're aware – the more it actually brings us back to who we really are and our natural state of joyfulness, peace and happiness.

Anthony De Mello says, *"Happiness is not an achievement. Love is not an achievement. Holiness is not an achievement. But all are a part of our natural state, and they are all a part of the grace of God."* See, happiness, love and holiness aren't the achievement; they are gifts: gifts from the grace of God that are ever and always present. And awareness is the thing that brings us back to the truth of our happiness, love and holiness.

So the three things about awareness that are powerful – that will liberate us from our attachments.

The first one is that we need to practice observing. Anthony De Mello says, *"Observe yourself. Self-observation is such a delightful and extraordinary practice!"* And the reason of just observing ourselves is so powerful is: we get to see the dramas and the stories and the feelings and the "stuff" that we just make up. All of those things are illusions that go through our heads every day. And starting to observe ourselves – what we're thinking; what we're feeling; what's going on with us – actually helps eliminate the illusions, and helps dissolve them, to be fully present to the truth of ourselves and our lives.

Now, this observing and increasing our awareness of ourselves takes some time. But it's about observing your reactions. Observing how you show up in a relationship. How you communicate. What you say and

don't say. It's about how you show up in your work. How you show up in the way you treat yourself and think about yourself. How you show up in nature. All of the things that we feel and yearn. All of the emotions that we go through.

You know, sometimes people think, *"Self-awareness; man, that's hard!"* But you know what's harder? Being unaware of ourselves! When we're not aware of what we're feeling, what we're desiring, or what is hurting, or where we're wounded ... When we're not aware of what's going on in ourselves: not aware of our purpose, not aware of our divine nature ... That's hard. That's the thing that causes a lot of pain and suffering.

A question to ask ourselves: So would you rather live a life of ignorance, avoidance and closing off? Or would you rather live a life where you were facing and embracing and fully open to all aspects of yourself and your life? We have a choice! We can run and tune out and turn off, shut down and stay stuck in our false beliefs. Or we can choose – we can make a bold choice to choose happiness over our attachments! To choose living consciously over unconsciously. And choosing to live creatively instead of mechanically.

You know, self-awareness is so powerful and so liberating that – even when we become aware of something painful that's been buried in us – just that awareness, alone, still will feel liberating. And it will always feel better than burying and hiding things, and being unconscious and unaware.

So here's a practice for this week: I want you to make a commitment for one hour each day, just to start. One hour. And just observe what you're feeling. Just observe that, *"I'm feeling a little bit uncomfortable."* Or, *"I'm feeling a bit sad."* Or, *"I'm feeling a little attached"* or *"I'm feeling inferior."* *"I'm feeling scared"* or *"I'm feeling excited."* You know, if you're feeling tense, just observe that you're feeling tense. Even if you observe that you're resisting observing, that's still a good thing! Just observing what's going on with yourself in a conscious way is a powerful thing! An important thing! And a liberating thing.

And here's the most important part: is don't try to change anything about you. Just observe what's going on. And I guarantee you, it'll begin to loosen the grip of whatever that is. You know, forcing ourselves to change does not work; in fact, it makes things worse. But when we just observe – when we're just aware – it is amazing how things begin to change. Even just observing that we're grieving, or we're feeling loss or despair – even that – just helps us move through it in a more conscious and easier and healthier way.

I love when Scripture says, *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death"* ... That when we observe ourselves, we can walk through those valleys – and process and move through them – and not get stuck or lost.

Do you know that the regular practice of observing – the regular practice of self-awareness – is literally the foundation for living more fully, more freely and more consciously, and leads us back to our natural state of happiness?

The second practice in awareness is about accepting. You ever had a hard time accepting something in your life? Accepting that someone did this? Or accepting that that happened? You think, *"It just shouldn't have happened!"* You know 95% of the things that upset most human beings – that we think about over and over again – are things that we cannot change! We spend so much of our lives getting angry and fighting against things that we cannot change! And sometimes people do it for years! I know some people who are still having a hard time accepting something that happened 30 years ago! Still constantly thinking, *"That shouldn't have happened! That was wrong! That was horrible!"* I bet you could think of something in your life right now that you're having – that you're upset with. I bet you, at some level, it is having trouble accepting something that you cannot change.

You know, Jesus said, *"In this life there'll be trials and tribulations."* And what I think he meant by that was: Look! In this life, you've got to accept a part of the deal is there's going to be some pain and disappointment and discomfort. There's going to be things you can't control! Like someone dying. Like the weather. And sometimes things not working out.

So don't fight against it! Don't keep arguing and resisting and resenting and hating things that happen! You know, I love what it says in *The Big Book*: *"The answer to all my problems today is acceptance."* Fighting against reality and fighting against life – fighting against things we can't change – is one of the biggest wastes of time.

You know, in spiritual teachings, none of them say, *"Run away from life."* All spiritual teachings invite us into a full embracing and a full living, and being fully present to whatever's going on. That's how you find God! That's how you find truth. That's how you find peace and wisdom, and connect to the divine within ourselves.

Acceptance is about making peace with whatever has happened in our lives. Whatever we have done; whatever has happened. Because making peace and finding acceptance is the greatest way to handle whatever it is that's going on in our lives.

You know, I think we all know the power of the Serenity Prayer: *"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."* Even if we can change something, acceptance is always the best road. Acceptance is always the best way to handle things. And I'll give you a perfect example: Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. Even though they did not like the way things were in terms of civil rights or the independence of their countries, they made peace. They had a level of acceptance that that's the way things were. And it was from that place of peace that they were able to work more effectively.

See, if they were just fighting and hating and resisting, they wouldn't have the creative energy and the love to have worked through things to make the changes that they did in life! No matter what is going on in our lives, acceptance is always the path to peace. The path to healing and forgiveness. The path to change and learning and moving forward with our lives. And it actually helps all of our actions become more efficient and much more effective. And we tend to be far more happier and fulfilled. Acceptance is the answer to all of our problems. Acceptance is the path to greater happiness and success.

And so: Are you willing to accept that, in your life, they're going to be trials and tribulations? In your life, somethings aren't going to work out. And making peace with it is the best way to move forward; the best way to be happy in the present; the best way to be more effective in the future. So what in your life do you need to make peace with? What in your life is it time for you to accept?

And the final thing is to not judge. Not judging. You know, I read something about the story of Adam and Eve. And it said, you know: everybody says that the first sin was to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And I heard someone say that the real first sin they committed was judging themselves! Because when they did this, the first thing: they judged themselves as bad. You know, they judged themselves as naked and being ashamed. And I thought that was very, very interesting! That judging ourselves is one of the worst sins.

The Bible warns us to, *"Judge not!" "Don't judge!" "Don't condemn!"* Because you know what that does, when we judge? When we condemn? It is: we are seeing the worst. We are looking for the bad. We are looking and emphasizing the negative in ourselves. I mean, have you ever judged yourself? And beat yourself up and put yourself down? And thought you just weren't good enough? And how stupid you were or how dumb you were for saying something or doing something? This constant barrage of judging ourselves is one of the most harmful things that we do to ourselves. Always labeling ourselves as "bad" or "failures" or "dummies."

I actually read an article this week that said that judging yourself is harmful to your health! It not only affects your mental health, but it affects your physical self! And it affects our relationships, as well.

You know, when I talked about observing, it is observing without judgement. When I talked about accepting, it's about accepting without judgement and condemnation. You know, why do you think we always need to fix ourselves, or think we need to? It is because we judge ourselves as "not enough." We're always comparing ourselves, criticizing ourselves and measuring ourselves against unhealthy standards.

And so one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves is to not judge ourselves. Just to accept who we are. Because you know when we stop judging? It brings peace of mind. It increases our health. Improves our relationships. But here's the thing it does that I love ... is that it does three things. When we stop judging, it opens a place for understanding, for compassion, and for being more gentle and loving with ourselves, as well as others.

So I want you to think of one thing right now that you judge yourself for. And are you willing to let go of your judgement and to be more understanding, more compassionate, and more gentle and loving with yourself? And what's one thing that you judge someone else in your life for? And are you willing to stop judging them, and open a place for understanding, for compassion, and being gentle and more loving with them?

See, what happens is: when you judge less, it makes us lighter and brighter, more free, and more joyous! The less we judge, the more we can observe and accept. And when our awareness goes up, our attachments come down. When our happiness gets bigger and expanded, our need to fix ourselves actually gets smaller and diminishes.

So here are the three practices for this week. You've got to practice observing yourself: just observe; don't have to change or force. Practice accepting. You know, make peace with what has happened. You can't change those things! And, finally, not judging. Don't judge yourself or others; just open a place for understanding, compassion and being more loving.

And you know, when you do this: you know what's going to happen? Moments of happiness! Spontaneous happiness will happen that doesn't depend on anything happening or not happening in your life. When you practice these things I guarantee you: they will take you back to your natural state, and take you back to the grace of God. And you will discover that – through awareness – you can experience a greater level of happiness. And you can stop fixing yourself!

God bless you all!

SOLO

Guest artist Alexandra Ncube sings "It's All About You"

You know the right words, they're all in your head
So wake up in the morning and get out of bed
The dreams you've been dreaming were right, now's the time
You build up these monsters, they're just in your mind

If you feel it in your heart, then sing it loud
I know you know who you are
It's all about, it's all about you

You just gotta know, gotta know
You can do it on your own
This is why I wrote this song

You know it's about you
It's always about you

Never let a dream grow cold
Even when you're losing hope
Guess it's why I wrote this song
You know it's about you
It's always about you
So there you go

I know the feeling like you'll never win
Your heart's in the washer, your head's in a spin
You try and you try, but you can't catch a break
But sometimes believing is all that it takes

If you feel it in your heart, then sing it loud
Oh oh oh oh, oh oh oh oh
I know you know who you are, so sing it loud
It's all about you

You just gotta know, gotta know
You can do it on your own
Guess it's why I wrote this song
You know it's about you
It's always about you

Never let a dream grow cold
Even when you're losing hope
Guess it's why I wrote this song
You know it's about you
It's always about you
So there you go

If it's playing in your car, don't turn it down
I know you know who you are, so sing it loud
If you feel it in your heart, it's all about
It's all about you

You just gotta know, gotta know
You can do it on your own
Guess it's why I wrote this song
You know it's about you
It's always about you

Never let a dream grow cold
Even when you're losing hope
Guess it's why I wrote this song
You know it's about you
It's always about you
So there you go
There you go; there you go

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful to all of you who are sending in your checks and who are contributing online that keeps all of our programs going during this time.

Our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."*

And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts and these tithes and these offerings. We know they are given in love, they are received in love, and that they move through the ministry with the energy of Divine love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed – heaped up, pressed down and overflowing – for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: Well, we're grateful that you could join us online for our music and our meditation and our message! We hope you were uplifted by all of that. And now will you join me in affirming our Prayer for Protection?

The light of God surrounds us;
The love of God enfolds us;
The power of God protects us;
The presence of God watches over us.
Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

And now we will enjoy as the choir sings our Peace Song. Have a blessed week!

Choir sings Peace Song:

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!
Let there be peace on earth
The peace that was meant to be!

With God as Creator
Family all are we!
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony!

Let peace begin with me;
Let this be the moment now!
With every breath I take
Let this be my joyous vow:
To take each moment and live each moment
In peace eternally!

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!

Copyright 2021 Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center/Rev. Richard Maraj