

PASTOR'S NOTES. Suppressing Thoughts.

You might have heard about a concept in social psychology called the “white bear problem.” It comes from a reference to Dostoevsky 1863 writing about how when you try not to think about a white bear, you just keep thinking about it. Professionals have called it Ironic Process Theory, Ironic Rebound, or Mental Suppression. If we were more Biblically literate, we would realize that it is found in a much older source:

“What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness...”
(Romans 7:7-8a, NRSV)

Psychologists have suggested that the reason we have so much trouble clearing unwanted thoughts is that our mind has to operate two processes: one is the operating process, the process to will away the unwanted thing, and the monitoring process, the checking to make sure that thing is gone. So as long as we are trying to avoid it, the unwanted thing has to be somewhere in our mind.

There are several strategies psychologists have suggested to get rid of these unwanted thoughts, but these usually come down to one of two approaches: the first is to redirect our attention by thinking or doing something else – whether just in our thoughts, or in exercise, meditation, prayer, etc. A woman once said to me, “I am through with this... no more drugs, no more drinking for me.” I said to her, “that’s great, but what are you going to do instead?” Jesus in Matthew 12:43-45 tells of an evil spirit returning to a person and finding the space empty. We can’t function in the world strictly by not doing things; life is doing. Another concept in psychology is called the “dead man’s test.” The question is “Can a dead man do it?” For example, you could argue that for 8 of the 10 commandments, a dead man does better than us: he never takes the name of the Lord in vain, or steal, kill, etc. This idea that we need not only to avoid, but to focus on other things is not new:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”
(Philippians 4:8, NRSV)

I wonder, however, if this behavior has its limits. We might misuse this sound advice to avoid thoughts. The second approach is to face the unwanted thought in some way, ideally in a prayerful manner. We already know that to experience forgiveness, we need to be willing to face our sin and confess:

“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. (Selah) Then I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and You forgave the guilt of my sin. (Selah)''

(Psalm 32:1-5, NRSV)

All of us experience unwanted thoughts at some point. It takes some attention to determine if a thought truly is worth suppressing, or better to process and maybe discard. Sometimes our thoughts are so scary that we immediately push them away with any processing. A woman tells her counselor she has thoughts of killing herself. The thought first popped into her head, and she tried to put it out of her mind, but it kept coming back, and so she asked, “does this mean I really want to kill myself?” The short answer is no, but what she is stuck on is the white bear problem. We need to be reminded that such thoughts are common to most of us, and at some point we need to critically challenge them and move on.

I’ve wondered if this effect relates to our political climate. There is a lot of emotion around political issues that I suspect relates to these unwanted thoughts – particularly those thoughts like “if I thought that, I’d be one of them” or “my opponent might be right about some of this.” (Spoiler alert – it is almost always true that our opponent is right about *something*.) If we are ready to acknowledge that somewhere in our different points of view there is real common ground, we might be able to start having real conversations.

I also wonder about our personal faith. I suspect that all of us have random moments of doubt about whether there is a God, whether there is good in the world, whether anybody loves me, whether I will die into nothingness. At the moment those thoughts hit us, they may seem to be the most obvious truth of this life. If we recognize that sometimes these thoughts are just silly, we can easily move on. But I know that most people do not grow in their faith, and I wonder if part of that has to do with avoiding those thoughts instead of challenging them. I think that many of us are afraid that a moment of doubt signals a bigger weakness in us. We might instead ask ourselves, is it really reasonable for me to think I am all alone in the world, or that there isn’t some source of beauty and meaning in life?

I’ve run out of room to write more about this now. Perhaps I will write more later, but maybe I’ve written enough to encourage you to challenge your own unwanted thoughts, because I am convinced that you will see that there is a greater purpose to you being alive and here than you’ve realized so far.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kam' or similar, written in a cursive style.