



**08/23/2020 Stop-Observe-Grow**  
**Isaiah 56:1.6-8; Romans 11:1-2a.29-32; Matthew 15:10-28**

Our negative thoughts can pull us down: they can create anxiety, anger, resentment, jealousy—an array of emotions. To have negative thoughts is normal. To hold on to them and act out of them is another story, one that is not recommended. The short-lived arousal that we get from this way of thinking can become addictive, derailing us from what we want most in life. In the long run, negative thinking saps our energy, erodes our self-confidence, and can mark our personality.

Certainly, our thoughts come and go so quickly that it seems impossible to notice them, but with some practice and an attitude of self-compassion, we can learn how to observe our negative thoughts and choose a constructive response to the challenges of life.

You might have heard the legend of the Two Wolves that is said to come to us from the Cherokee people. It illustrates the most important battle of our lives, the one between our good and bad thoughts. Here is how it goes:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Our thoughts can be our own worst enemy. That is, if we let them. Consider how you may be “feeding” your negative thoughts by allowing them to rule your mind. Sometimes, we’re just not aware of what wolf we’re feeding. Sometimes, the choices we make, the things we watch, the jokes that we tell, the people that we hang out with are unwittingly contributing to thoughts, opinions, and worldviews that feed this wolf. We secretly hope this wolf doesn’t win, but we keep feeding him.

Next time you notice having a negative thought, stop that thought in its tracks. Observe it and then ask yourself, “What is this thought doing for me?” You will find that most of the time the thought is winding you up with a sequel of more unpleasant thoughts. This gets you all knotted up, disempowering you.

When you observe this self-defeating outcome of your thoughts, you can choose to immediately interrupt that way of thinking and focus on something good in your life. You will realize that this interruption will empower you and give you the space to choose a more constructive line of thinking. One way to get to that place is by



**08/23/2020 Stop-Observe-Grow**  
**Isaiah 56:1.6-8; Romans 11:1-2a.29-32; Matthew 15:10-28**

cultivating the practice of gratitude. Many Christians before us have endured tremendous negativity and still were able to thank God declaring that all is grace.<sup>1</sup>

We have the choice to create greater peace, confidence, and a more positive outlook by learning how to manage our thoughts. On the other hand, we may be so committed to particular thoughts and philosophies which we don't find to be negative at all. They may be fruit of our educational upbringing, our cultural formation, peer pressure, or our own self-education and interpretation of reality. Because things need to make sense to us, we interpret reality with the tools we have at our disposal.

However, we may grow up and live in a specific cultural bubble. If we live in cultural isolation; if the interpretation of reality is fed to us through a pretty well controlled source of information; if our conversations happen within socially closed groups; if we are not exposed to a variety of views arrived at through different optics then our approach to life is rather rigid, monolithic, and perhaps even fiercely protected. But if we keep a porous mind, allow for multiple sources of information, and consider a variety of opinions and insights, in other words, if we are open to new input, we may be surprised with growth and a renewed spirit.

This may have happened to Jesus as well. In today's gospel, the cultural and theological experience of his upbringing is challenged by the theological insight of a foreigner and he changes his mind. He has clearly taught the crowd that they shouldn't worry so much about the kosher quality of the food they put into their mouths as much as what comes out of them. It is good to pay attention to our diet, but it is even more important to watch what we spew out and how our thoughts, words and actions or inactions may damage our neighbor. And yet, no matter how attentive we may be with our words and attitudes, our socio-political identity is so ingrained that we easily become victims of our mental conditioning, ignorance, and limited understanding.

It is fascinating to see how Jesus himself is challenged to have a different perspective on reality when a Canaanite woman approaches him on behalf of her daughter. Jesus does what he trained himself to do: he takes his time and does not impulsively respond. The gospel tells us, "he did not answer her at all." Other translations try a less offensive report: "Jesus does not say a word." The Word is silent. It is a short moment but pregnant with significance. Jesus is not speechless. There is always a moment of drama preceding a divine pronouncement like when at the beginning of the story of

---

<sup>1</sup> "Everything is a grace, everything is the direct effect of our Father's love - difficulties, contradictions, humiliations, all the soul's miseries, her burdens, her needs - everything, because through them, she learns humility, realizes her weakness. Everything is a grace because everything is God's gift. Whatever be the character of life or its unexpected events - to the heart that loves, all is well." (Theresa of Lisieux)



**08/23/2020 Stop-Observe-Grow**  
**Isaiah 56:1.6-8; Romans 11:1-2a.29-32; Matthew 15:10-28**

creation we are told that the earth was a formless void with darkness, wind, and water and then God said: "Let there be light." (Genesis 1)

Or like when the Hebrews were ordered to prepare diligently for three days for an encounter with God in the wilderness of Sinai and finally, on the third day, there was lightning and thunder, and a thick cloud covering the mountain. And the mountain shook. And there was a loud blast of trumpet. And God descended on the mountain in fire and gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. (Exodus 19-20)

Or look at the prophet Elijah. After escaping from wicked Queen Jezebel and King Ahab, he hunkered down under a broom tree and told God he had had enough with life and was ready to die. Instead, God sent him on a 40-day hike, and promised to appear to him. So, after finding a cave to hide in, Elijah waited for God, expecting a powerful divine apparition that would put the king's giant army and 2,000 chariots to shame. Elijah waited. He heard a mighty wind, saw an earthquake, and witnessed fire covering the earth. But none of those revealed God. No, God finally came to him in a whisper, and announced something of grave consequence: the enemies of truth will be defeated. (1 Kings 19)

There is dramatic silence prior to Jesus' words to the insistent voice of the Canaanite woman who comes to him, pleading for the health, the wholeness, the life of her child. Is he ignoring her plea? Is he slowing down his reaction so he can observe his thoughts and feelings and choose an appropriate reply? Is he allowing enough thinking time for his disciples to figure out what is going on? Do the disciples feel embarrassment? Have they come to grips with their own feelings and thoughts about the situation? Are they going through an internal battle between what is right according to the social norm supported by religion and what is just per divine standards? Assuming they even know what the customary religious praxis is, would they challenge its ethical application to the need of this woman?

I also wonder what the woman must have been thinking as she encounters the Lord's wall of silence. Does she feel disrespected? Is she, a woman and a Canaanite, accustomed to the silent chauvinistic treatment from men and especially Jews and therefore chooses to be persistent?

On the other hand, isn't she aware of her proper place vis-a-vis a Jew? Jews have made their ethnic superiority clear on the basis of their religious integrity. What makes her think she can brazenly and with impunity advance her request? Does she have a prayer? Anyone with a pressing need knows how horrible it feels to have a dire or significant request for help or information met with dead silence.



**08/23/2020 Stop-Observe-Grow**  
**Isaiah 56:1.6-8; Romans 11:1-2a.29-32; Matthew 15:10-28**

Jesus is pretty much a man of his time and place. The remarkable progress in self-understanding and commitment to the cause of God is not a done deal. Just like any other human being, Jesus must be on a daily self-discovery journey and constant growth as he processes the events of life with his learned perception of God.

Don't we all try to make sense of what is happening around us by absorbing news and commentaries even though we know we need to stay alert because they lean one way or the other and sometimes we agree and sometimes we disagree with them? Don't we all rely on our cultural bias, the sentiments of those we identify with, of those of the same class and position in society, of those with similar educational upbringing, and on the opinions of those we trust? Yet, can they be trusted all the times?

Don't we all refer to the Bible as the place where we can understand God's correct will for a just society and to religion as a reliable filter for our interpretation of that will? Isn't that what Jesus has done with the Canaanite woman? Isn't he a human being in all things like us (but sin) struggling to live a faithful and honest life, a meaningful life, trying to make sense of human relationships especially those most challenging? Doesn't he strive to live in integrity with his values as prescribed by God? Shouldn't he be allowed to live according to God's rule the best he can?

Jesus is a human being who has experienced the same difficulties we go through, including the common struggle to perceive the presence of God in all things and honor that presence in his interactions with others. Isn't God watching us and expecting of us a response to life that is in line with God's principles and the application of God's will on Earth as it is in heaven?

This is what Jesus is all about. He is about announcing God's favor for all humanity and about restoring the justice of the Kingdom of God. And yet, Jesus has cutting words for the Canaanite that pretty much reflect the culture of the time and the theological interpretation of God's will.

Was he convinced of the words he spoke? Did he say those words for the purpose of reminding everyone of the correct order of priorities? Did he speak in such a manner for the purpose of soliciting exactly the kind of response he got from the woman? Was that his way of sensitizing us towards striking a balance between what our culture, our laws, our religion tells us is right and what our guts tell us is just?

I think Jesus is also learning as he goes: besides a general idea of where life is taking him, it looks like Jesus is learning to discern his mission one step at a time. Isn't this what we, individually and together, are all called to do? Jesus has modeled the way to us.



**08/23/2020 Stop-Observe-Grow**  
**Isaiah 56:1.6-8; Romans 11:1-2a.29-32; Matthew 15:10-28**

Hearing it in this way, while still powerfully disturbing, this is the most life-giving understanding I can take with me. For if Jesus is just feeling his way forward with some basic tenets or values to guide him on his way, what is to say this is not also so for all of us? Yes, this is what he does: he moves forward and then, from time to time, he adjusts his thinking and his process. He observes his mind and his life principles, but he does not take himself too seriously even though he has all the reasons to do so.

He is flexible in learning even from a woman and a stranger, and humble enough to change route when wrong. He, the Lord and Son of David, takes a theological lesson from an unnamed desperate woman. He knows his message and gift are for all nations. Yet, he needs to correct his timing. His disagreement with her cannot interfere with his mercy and compassion. She brings a different perspective, and Jesus recognizes that she is correct. He obliges.

We, like him, need to learn to balance principles with compassion, knowledge with wisdom, legal justice with righteousness. The current struggle in the country surely alarms all of us. People from all sides wonder where civility and democracy have gone.

We would do better to take a step back and see where the partisan rhetoric is leading us, how our values and principles align with our reading of reality and our choices, and finally wonder if our personal indignation is leading us into rigid self-righteousness and a blaming attitude.

It is not enough to ask, "What Would Jesus Do?" at least not the Jesus we know prior to his encounter with the persistent woman who was breaking (physical and) cultural boundaries.

Maybe we also can venture beyond our cultural sensitivities and philosophical divisions, and consider in an intentionally thoughtful way what can each side contribute to our current social uncertainty.

We know we will not be able to go back to the way things were. But that is not totally negative: there is growth in letting go of the past and building on new insights and observations.

Maybe not all that is tossed in the conversation will be doable or even useful, but perhaps the lesson we can take from the gospel is that the last few months have revealed a racial divide that needs to be addressed and exorcised and we have the Jesus model and capacity to grow closer to the will of God on Earth.



**08/23/2020 Stop-Observe-Grow**

**Isaiah 56:1.6-8; Romans 11:1-2a.29-32; Matthew 15:10-28**

God's vision for us is bigger, larger, and deeper than what we used to have or can even imagine. May we have the flexibility of heart and the openness of mind to learn from Jesus and trust our faith. Amen.