

As we wrestle with these questions, whether in solitude or in community, we bring to light some of the material that needs to be named, discerned, and healed.

EXAMINATION OF OUR REACTIONS

Our reactions are a source of important revelation for our lives. They tell us more about ourselves than about other people. I mentioned earlier that in the Thanksgiving conversation with my wife, I had been paying attention to my reactions. There is a reason for that. I don't know about you, but there are times when my reactions to people, moments, news, or experiences are disproportionate to the actual event.

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There have been times when I notice an email from that person (we all have *that* person), and just seeing their name creates uneasiness in me. There are instances when I go down a road in my mind, envisioning how a situation might play out, and still it doesn't unfold how I anticipated. We all sometimes have disproportionate reactions to various encounters and experiences.

The key is asking questions that are introspective in nature, such as, *Why am I reacting this way? What is causing me to feel this angst?* and *Why am I so triggered by this person?* As we make sense of our reactions, we position

ourselves to experience greater freedom. We will also find that our reactions can change, limiting the negative effects they might have on us. Let me give you an example from a conversation I had with a congregant.

After every Sunday worship service, I stand in the lobby of our building to connect with people from our congregation. On one recent occasion, a young woman approached me and asked if she could have a word with me. I stepped a couple of feet to the side to avoid the congregational traffic jam and listened intently.

She told me that something I had said in the sermon bothered her. I had been preaching about prayer and had shared a particular anecdote that she'd perceived as condescending and insensitive. After listening for a moment and asking a few clarifying questions, I attempted to explain what I meant. She didn't see it and reiterated her perception of that preaching moment. The conversation lasted a long four or five minutes, and we both walked away agreeing to disagree.

A few weeks later, I was greeting congregants again in the lobby. This time it was after the third and final service of the day. As I was in conversation with someone, I saw out of the corner of my eye that the same young woman was waiting for me. *Oh no, what did I say now?* I thought.

She waited patiently for me to finish greeting others and approached me. I think I greeted her a bit too enthusiastically to compensate for the tension I thought I would experience again, but she went right into the conversation. "Pastor Rich, do you recall the conversation we had a few weeks ago?"

"Yes, I do," I replied.

She then said, "Since that time, I've been thinking

about my reaction to your sermon. I've come to realize that I wasn't really bothered by your words. That wasn't the root problem. Your words inadvertently triggered a nagging feeling of shame that I've carried for years from my family of origin. I've started to address that area of brokenness in my life. I hope I didn't come across as disrespectful or condescending."

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My eyes opened with delight, relief, and conviction. I've certainly said my fair share of things that have genuinely offended people, but in this case, a mature, self-reflective congregant did the work of self-examination, revealing my own deficiencies in this area. I had not taken the time to do what she had done. It was a wonderful pastoral-growth moment, reminding me that our reactions hold key insights for our own transformation.

In the examination of our reactions, we live from a place of depth, wisdom, and discernment. We find ourselves in a better place to reject the lies and stories that often distort our vision. Our perceptions become clearer; we make fewer assumptions and live without the heavy burden of self-justification, self-condemnation, and the need to judge others.

In the fall of 2018, for a month's time I decided that I would take inventory of my reactions. I noticed that I was being easily triggered by criticisms and I carried a

nagging sense of uneasiness about difficult conversations that needed to be had. I resolved that if I found myself negatively or disproportionately reacting to someone or something, I would take a few minutes during the day to process that moment through five questions:

1. *What happened?*
2. *What am I feeling?*
3. *What is the story I'm telling myself?*
4. *What does the gospel say?*
5. *What counter-instinctual action is needed?*

In the simplicity of wrestling with these questions, I became freer. For that month, I engaged in this practice almost daily. In so doing, I noticed how emotionally fragile and fearful I had been with certain people in particular. In the processing of these questions (sometimes for ten minutes, sometimes thirty or more), I began to see some of the lies I'd been believing. Let me give a short example.

One day I received an email from a well-known Christian leader and author. She is someone I respect and have learned from. She noticed a resource for prayer that I had posted on social media and in a thoughtful, kind way asked if I would consider making some adjustments on the resource so a larger community of people could benefit from it.

For some reason, her email message triggered me. Although there was not a single unkind word in the message, upon reading it the first and second time, I perceived

the email as a slight. I thought, *Who does she think she is sending me this?* I found myself somewhat embarrassed that I had not anticipated the change she suggested and closed my laptop in an effort to move away from that moment. About fifteen minutes later, I decided to examine my reaction. This is my (shortened) journal entry:

- *What happened?* A well-known leader offered constructive feedback.
- *What am I feeling?* Shame.
- *What is the story I'm telling myself?* If I don't do things right the first time (or ever, for that matter), I'm defective.
- *What does the gospel say?* My failures and mistakes don't define me; God's love does.
- *What counter-instinctual action is needed?* Share this story with Rosie (which was counter-instinctual for me because I tend to keep moments like this to myself).

Sometime during that month's practice, I noticed my triggers starting to diminish. I found myself less bothered by criticism and feedback. I was able to see many of the reactions for what they were: moments for healing brought forth by the gospel. Do I still get triggered? Absolutely. Do I still need healing from destructive scripts? Indeed. But something had shifted in my soul.

The number of times I've had to sit and process my emotions in this way has subsided. There's the ongoing work of formation that I still must engage in, but my

journey of capturing and examining my reactions has set me on a path toward a greater sense of freedom.

The goals of self-examination are threefold. First, through these practices, we open ourselves up to the grace and presence of God. The truth is, we are all in the same boat of needing a regular rhythm to help us to grow in awareness of our blind spots, shadow sides, and hidden sins.

Second, we live in the world with greater freedom, untangling ourselves from the web of inner dysfunction and confusion. The practice of looking within is not to be an act of masochism but a choice to honor our own feelings without shame or judgment.

Third, we become a presence in this world, more capable of working toward peace with our neighbors and love for those who might be considered enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed us to take the way of self-examination, removing the logs from our own eyes that we may see the specks of dust in our neighbors' eyes (see Matthew 7:5; Luke 6:42). The world is in desperate need of people willing to examine their own selves before examining others. The work of "other-examination" comes all too naturally. We are accustomed to viewing, judging, and comparing others rather than ourselves. That's easy. The way of self-examination is hard. But by God's grace, the Spirit can help us.