

THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY LIFE: Becoming Your Authentic Self
Hebrews 4:7-13; Luke 14:7-30 First United Methodist - Auburn, Indiana
April 11, 2011 Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

When Jesus calls us to follow him as he does Simon Peter and Andrew in Matthew 4:19, he wants us to bring along our emotions...that raw, unfinished stuff that may be down deep. When Jesus calls us to follow him he wants us to bring along our emotions.

We're going to be using Peter Scazzerro's book on emotionally healthy spirituality. There is a line near the beginning of the book that asks the question: "Why is it that so many Christians are such miserable people?"

In this series we're going to be exploring how healthy emotional spirituality can set us free to live an abundant life. Last weekend we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, and in this series we'll look at how our faith and the resurrection power of God can bring health to our emotional life.

When Jesus calls us to follow him he wants us to bring along our emotions.

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's a big ocean.

I've spent some time on the ocean. I've taken ships across the ocean several times in my life. I have leaned over the railings of ships and looked down at the surface of the water. And I've sat on beaches and looked out at the water. And I've even swum a good deal in the ocean -but always with my eyes closed. Oh, I'd swim or walk out a hundred yards off the coast of Fort Myers' Beach. I'd look down at the bottom of the ocean as I stood there or paddled around, but there wasn't much to see. A little sand. A little seaweed. Sometimes a school of small fish. Nothing much to write home about.

So when people would talk about going snorkeling, putting on goggles and looking down beneath the surface, I found the idea pretty intriguing. One time, we found ourselves in Hawaii and decided to try snorkeling. We flew out there years ago to spend a week with my cousin and his wife. I wanted to eat fresh pineapple, I wanted to see lava flows, and I wanted to go snorkeling.

It's a big ocean.

One of the crazy things about going snorkeling is how awkward it is. In fact, what you do is you put your flippers on and you walk backwards out into the surf. You feel foolish doing that. You can't look cool when you are stumbling around in flippers, walking backwards, fumbling with your goggles. Then, before you get down in the water one of the experts tells you to spit on the glass of your goggles. "It helps keep the lenses clear," they say. So there you are spitting onto the lens of your goggles, walking backwards, stumbling around, and just looking odd.

What you do, then, is just lay down on the surface of the water. I thought I was going to be doing a lot of swimming. A lot of paddling around. But not really. You don't need to do a lot of swimming when you go snorkeling. You don't need to cover a lot of distance when you go snorkeling. You just stretch out on the surface of the water face down.

It's a big ocean.

When you lie on the surface of the water and you look down you see all sorts of things you never knew were there. There is all this life, there is all this activity going on, just twenty-five or forty yards off-shore! Beneath the surface. It was breath-taking. Different kinds of fish. Different colors of fish. Different sizes of fish. Some moving fast. Some moving slow.

Before we had gotten in the water we had been warned about staying away from sea turtles. Giving them plenty of room. If you touch a sea turtle you can be fined. So I went out

a few yards of the beach, put my goggles on, stretched out on the surface of the water, and there was a sea turtle right below me. Down on the bottom. Nosing around. And then the turtle started coming right towards me. It turned up towards the surface, the flippers tugging at the water, propelling it in my direction. I began paddling backwards as quickly as I could... there was no collision but it was close. I couldn't wait to tell the others about my close encounter with a sea turtle.

It's a big ocean.

There are a lot of things you miss if you never bother looking beneath the surface.

We're beginning a series of messages titled *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* this morning. Our journey is loosely based on Peter Scazzero's helpful book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.

Peter is the founding pastor New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York. It's a charismatic, evangelical church. I'm not sure what all the labels mean anymore, but some of you may not talk about God using the kinds of words Peter does. You'll have to do some translating of his message into your own faith language.

Today we are dealing with the whole subject of emotions...feelings. You know...those things swimming around down below the surface. Some moving fast and some moving slow. Some kind of delightful and some terrifying.

There are three assumptions Peter Scazzero makes about what it means to be human, to belong to God, to be a part of the church, and emotions.

First, emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable. We can't be spiritual mature without being emotionally healthy.

Second, the church is the primary tool God uses to grow us up and bring us to both spiritual maturity and emotional health. The church is the life lab where we learn how to be fully human and what it means to love and be loved.

Third, the emotional health of the community we call the church isn't something someone else can "give us" but the health of the church is directly tied to our willingness -as individuals- to be emotionally healthy. We can't be emotionally unhealthy and then expect the community of the church to be healthy. The health of the church then depends on each of us living with courage and grace and honesty with one another.

Did you remember that statement we began with this morning?

When Jesus calls us to follow him, he wants us to bring along our emotions.

It's a big ocean.

And sometimes we aren't paying attention to what's going on down deep.

What that means is that there is too often a disconnect between where we are in our faith, how we see and relate to God, and our emotions.

Sometimes we aren't paying attention to what's going on down deep. Sometimes we are lying on our backs looking up at the sky and just missing the down deep stuff.

This moment in my life happened years. I was taking a class in seminary called *Pastoral Care in the Hospital Setting*. Those of us in the class would take a shift or two each week with the chaplaincy staff at Duke Medical Center. We'd do some reading. And then we would meet together near the end of the week. I've got to tell you I thought I was doing pretty well. I visited the patients I was expected to visit wearing my white Duke chaplain's jacket. I did a fair to decent job of active listening. I wrote down my notes. I did the reading. I was getting it done.

Which is what I did: I got things done.

I was just the sort of guy who got things done. Who handled things. The oldest of seven I would get knocked down by some big or small thing and I kept pushing. I kept going.

So there I was in North Carolina. Taking a full load of classes despite the fact that I was pastoring a congregation of about 180 folks. That had been through their own kind of civil war. I kept asking God to help me help them heal. Driving down dirt roads and two lane

blacktop highways, sitting with people in their homes, drinking sweet tea, and listening to them tell me how hurt they had been by the church. They'd give me vegetables from their gardens and I would return home around 8:30 or 9:30 with the back seat of my little car packed with bags full of tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, purpled hulled peas, corn and okra.

Full load of classes.

Pastoring a congregation that had been broken but was working to heal.

Being a husband.

And being daddy to a two year old boy.

Things were going well. I was handling things.

Then, at the end of the semester, the chaplain working with our pastoral care class sat down with us. He talked with us about what he saw. He turned to me and said, "You're missing it. You're always trying to do too much. You're cheating yourself and you're cheating other people and you're cheating God. You look like you're here but sometimes you're not. You're skating along on the surface of things. But life and doing ministry isn't just about going fast, getting things done, but going deep... and that won't happen until you slow down."

The class was still. My face turned red. I told him he was wrong. I told him he was out of line. I told him he didn't know what was going on in my heart. I began to cry...quietly.

I went home and told my wife what had happened. A friend in the class called and said he wondered how I was doing. He suggested I talk to the dean.

That night I tucked our son into bed, brushed my teeth, crawled into my own bed, hugged my wife, said a prayer, and lay there in the dark. Thinking about this stranger who didn't know what was going on in my heart...what I was feeling. Then, I realized he was right. I was moving fast. I was doing life on the surface. I realized that the one who didn't know what was going on in my heart, the one who was disconnected from my feelings, was me. I didn't know what was going on in my own heart.

There was a disconnect between my soul and my heart, between my spirituality and my emotions.

The writer of Hebrews (4:12-13) says the word of God is *"alive and active. Sharper than any double-edge sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*

The truth often times stings, I've found. When truth gets close to us, close to me, it often feels like a knife cutting down deep.

It's a big ocean.

And sometimes we aren't paying attention to what's going on down deep.

When Jesus calls us to follow him he wants us to bring along our emotions.

I'm not sure I understand why some of us are so hesitant to look beneath the surface. I'm not sure I understand why some of us don't bother to look down deep at what we are feeling or fearing. I'm not sure why some of us don't want to recognize where we are sad or mad or glad or afraid.

Some of us may have been raised in families where thinking was encouraged and feeling was a sign of weakness. Some of us may have grown up in families where feelings were seen as weak. Mad? Well, getting mad is a sign of a weak person. Get over it. Rub some dirt on it. Sad? Life is tough. Think through the issues. Solve the problem. Move on. Crying? "I'll give you something to cry about!" Happy? We were put here by God to serve, to suffer, and we're not supposed to be happy. Wanting to be happy, feeling joy, is selfish.

Some of us don't look down deep, we don't stop to notice what we are feeling, because we were raised in families where emotions were a sign of weakness.

And some of us may have been raised in faith communities where feelings were just ignored. To be a follower of Jesus, to be a Christian, meant that you didn't get angry or mad or scared or anxious or overly glad.

And maybe some of us never wanted to look beneath the surface because we were scared about what we would find down there.

When Jesus calls us to follow him he wants us to bring along our emotions.

The Word Made Flesh (and that means emotions!)

One of the most beautiful passages in all of scripture is the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John. Scholars call it “The Prologue.” It’s sort of like the opening part of a symphony. Where the main themes are introduced.

John says this in verse 14: *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

That phrase *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”* has something to say to us in this conversation about emotions. When God became flesh God didn’t just become a thinking or intellectual creature. God didn’t just become a physical creature... stepping into flesh and bone. God didn’t just become a social creature. God didn’t become a human being with a soul and spiritual hunger and spiritual needs. But God also became a human being with emotions.

“The Word became flesh.”

God put on skin.

God put on feelings.

Some artists have done Jesus a disservice: their portraits of Jesus make him look so serene, so above it all, that you can’t imagine Jesus feeling what we feel or thinking what we think. But walk through the gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. He was no stranger to the emotional side of life! Jesus experienced sadness, joy, frustration, fear, and loneliness. Jesus was no stranger to anger: he was angry at the religious teachers were better at helping people get lost than finding clarity about faith and life and God. Jesus cursed a fig tree and overturned the tables of the money changers in the Jerusalem Temple.

“The Word became flesh.”

Jesus Looks Beneath the Surface

Now you need to know something else about Jesus: Jesus looks beneath the surface. Jesus is in touch with what is going on down deep in his heart...his gut.

In the Gospel of Luke, we are told that the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for a period of forty days. During this time in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted. And, as he responds to the temptations, Jesus is deciding who he is and what his life will be about.

Scazzerro says that the temptations in the wilderness, for Jesus, are really about three things.

Jesus is being tempted to think that life is about what he does and produces. (Making bread.)

Jesus is being tempted to think that life is about what he has. (Palaces, kingdoms, power.)

Jesus is being tempted to think that life is about what people think of him. (Wow the crowds...impress the people...throw yourself down from a high place.)

Jesus comes to terms with who he is, and Jesus comes to terms with who God is, and Jesus comes to terms with what his life is all about.

After he tells us about the time of testing in the wilderness, Luke describes how Jesus goes home to Nazareth and preaches his first sermon in his hometown synagogue.

He knows he has been called by the Spirit, anointed by the Spirit, to preach the good news to the poor and set at liberty those who are held captive. So preaches a message that stresses the wideness of God’s mercy and outrages the traditionalists in the congregation. People are furious that Jesus stresses how God works miracles among, and loves, the very people the good people of Nazareth regard as enemies.

The congregation turns into a mob and tries to kill Jesus. He walks through the mob and goes on to do what God has called him to do. Psychologists would use the word “differentiation, I think, to describe what is happening: Jesus knows who he is, Jesus understands what he is feeling, and Jesus lives his authentic life rather than pleasing the crowd...rather than pretending.

When Jesus calls us to follow him he wants us to bring along our emotions.

Moving Towards Emotionally Healthy Spirituality

How can we, with the help of God, move towards emotionally healthy spirituality.

First, pay attention. Slow down, risk silence, and pay attention to your life.

It means being aware of what is going on in us. Being aware of what we are feeling, what we are thinking, what signals our bodies are sending us, and what the people know us best and love us best see in us. Bringing along our emotions means being aware of what is going on in us...not running away from it or denying it.

Years ago I came home at the end of the day and one our sons, who was around 9 or 10 at the time, said, “Why are you angry?” That stopped me. I had come through the door, asked people how their day had been, smiled, gotten out of my work clothes and put on blue jeans, and just been all around normal. Why was he asking why I was angry? I smiled a big, professional, “I’m just fine” daddy smile and said, “I’m not angry.” He shrugged and then a few minutes said, “Why are you angry? I think you are angry.”

I was smiling. I was hanging out with the family. We were getting ready for supper. Things were normal. Why in the world why he ask such a silly question? Then, as the house got quiet later in the evening, as things slowed down, I realized there was a deep down anger about something that I didn’t think anyone else could see...and I was doing my best to run away from it...deny it.

Live aware. Pay attention to what is going on inside. Listen when your body or the people who love you best are trying to tell you something true.

Second, be curious about what God is up to. God has a way of speaking to us through our intellect and God has a way of speaking to us through our feelings.

In the 5th chapter of Paul’s 2nd Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle says if anyone is in Christ then they are being made into a new creation.

What is God trying to do in your life through what you are feeling? What is God trying to help you see that you have been missing?

Ask the question, “What is Jesus trying to change in me? How is Jesus trying to grow me...heal me?” Sometimes what we are feeling is a sign that God is up to something in us.

Live aware.

And be curious about what God is up to in you...what Jesus is trying to change...what he is trying to help you see or be or do.

Third, be willing to move out of you comfort zone.

It felt totally awkward to walk backwards across the beach in flippers. It felt totally odd to breathe through a tube while lying face down in the ocean. But I had to be willing to try a new thing, look foolish, to see the beauty of what was below the surface.

Fourth, ask God to give you trusted companions who walk with you as you look beneath the surface and seek to live your best life. I have three friends who have known me for more than thirty years, and their friendship, their honesty, their care for me and their courage, has helped me do some of the hard work of looking beneath the surface. They have helped me see what I was missing. They have helped me see what I didn’t want to see.

It is worth noting that Jesus invested much of his life in twelve friends, twelve disciples, who traveled the road with him.

We were not meant to do this alone: ask God to help you identify some trusted friends who will help you do the exciting and scary work of getting in touch with your emotions.

Fifth, pray for courage. Change is never easy. Looking beneath the surface can be scary.

Here is a warning: when you change, when you begin living your authentic life rather than pretending to be who everyone seems to want you to be, some people aren't going to be happy. They will call you selfish if you try to set limits and dare to say "No" when you are being overextended. They will tell you that your sadness is a sign of spiritual failure and being mature means disregarding sadness.

Jesus preaches the message he knows God wants him to deliver, and a whole congregation of people are furious with him.

Pray for courage.

Chuck Yeager, when he flew the Bell X-1, took a great risk when he flew that rocket plane so fast it broke the sound barrier. The plane shook. It was scary. People wondered if he would make it back.

Change is scary and hard.

Paying attention to what is going on inside us can be both exciting and scary: prayer for courage.

Finally, when you hesitate to slow down and look beneath the surface, when you are afraid that you may discover some sad or scared or unfinished or broken stuff in your heart or life, remember God loves you no matter what. God loves you and there is no mess in your life that can persuade God to stop loving you.

So you don't need to feel the pressure of being perfect...all together. God loves you. Paul, in Romans 8, says there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ.

I have a friend who knows me. Really knows me. And he still is glad to hear from me. When we get the chance, we spend the evening together. Talk. Catch up. He still calls me a friend...even though he knows how broken and unfinished. We break bread together. He loves me. So I don't have to be afraid of being honest. Being real.

Peter Scazzero says they have a saying at New Life Fellowship (p. 83): "You can be yourself because there is nothing left to prove."

God loves you.

So you have the freedom to look beneath the surface.

The emotions you have been avoiding may -in fact- be a door to truth. They may be the door you need to walk through to live your best life.

You are so loved that you can be real.

Live curious.

Live aware.

When Jesus calls us to follow him he wants us to bring along our emotions.