

EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY: Loving Christ Above All Else

Psalm 119:33-48; Luke 10:38-11:13

First United Methodist Church (Auburn, IN)

May 16, 2021 Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

Grace and the Rhythm of Flying Fishing

Every now and then you stumble across a book or piece of music or a painting so beautiful it takes your breath away. That is the way it was for me the first time I read Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It."

In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ's disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.

It is true that one day a week was given over wholly to religion. On Sunday mornings my brother, Paul, and I went to Sunday school and then to "morning services" to hear our father preach and in the evenings to Christian Endeavor and afterwards to "evening services" to hear our father preach again. In between on Sunday afternoons...he was anxious to be on the hills where he could restore his soul and be filled again to overflowing for the evening sermon.

Even so, in a typical week of our childhood Paul and I probably received as many hours of instruction in fly fishing as we did in all other spiritual matters.

As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word "beautiful."

My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.

I love the lines where Maclean talks about picking up God's rhythm: ***As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty.***

Why Is It That So Many Christians Make Such Lousy Human Beings?

We're coming to the end of this series of messages about emotional healthy spirituality. We began this journey with a question a new church member asked Pastoer Peter Scazerro. The young woman, who had walked away from any involvement in any church for five years, decided to join the congregation Scazerro served and she asked

him this question: “Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?”

We began this series of messages with that question.

And we began this spiritual journey, this series of messages, with another observation: we cannot be spiritually healthy if we are not also emotionally healthy.

Will It Make Any Difference?

As we come to the end of this series of messages (*and, by the way, I believe sermons are really a part of an ongoing conversation between God, the preacher and the congregation*), I have found myself asking the question, “Does any of this make any difference? Will what we have said and thought and prayed, over these last weeks, change us in any way as individuals and as a church?”

Will it make any difference?

How will we change?

Those are the questions I was carrying with me as I walked around the neighborhood where I live on Wednesday night: Will what we have talked about, and the truth we have taken from scripture, make any difference in how we live? Will what God has been saying to us change who we are with God? Will it change what we say and do not only in the world outside these walls but inside these walls? *Sometimes the most unloving and Christian words are spoken inside the walls of churches... sometimes grace is better lived out on a factory floor or in a pub than it is in a cathedral filled with the pious.*

There are things we need to face, as individuals and as a church, and there are some old attitudes and habits we need to leave behind. There are some places, some behaviors, some ways of speaking with one another, we need to leave behind: we need to step out of our boots and walk towards the Father and live our best life in Christ.

Will it make any difference?

How will we change going forward because of this conversation?

That is what I was asking myself as I walked the neighborhood on Wednesday night. And I am asking those questions as I stand here this morning.

Intentional, Conscious Soul Practices: Keeping God at the Center (5)

In the last chapter of his book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Peter Sczerro talks about about loving Christ above else. He observes that one of the ways we do that is by embracing some soul practices into the rhythm of our daily lives so that we keep God at the center of our lives. Sczerro writes that the opportunity we have is to develop an intentional, conscious plan to keep God at the center of our daily life.

What it is all about, he observes, is a desire to be with God and to love God.

Develop a “Rule for Life,” he writes. Develop a spiritual rhythm and spiritual disciplines that keep God at the center for you. Among those, he suggests, are four main practices: prayer (which would include time in scripture and silence); rest (which means stopping, sabbath-keeping, and play time); the work of caring for the world in service and caring for our own bodies in healthy ways; and, finally, tending to our relationships so they are as healthy and honest as they can be.

Frankly, I found the last chapter of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* kind of overwhelming. Reading all that he suggests we do, I could feel myself becoming overwhelmed and exhausted.

I’m not good at keeping that many things straight - even if they are highly valued spiritual practices that might transform my relationship with God and my life. When I was a child in Europe, we would go to the circus and there was only one ring. I liked that. I could focus on one ring. When we came to the United States, circuses had three rings and that always felt like too much to me. I’m a one ring circus kind of guy. I’m a guy who needs simple.

And, so, I found myself going back to Pastor Adam Hamilton’s small book, *The Walk*, and his simple teaching to let the fingers on our hand remind us of 5 key spiritual practices that can keep God at the center and keep us connected to Christ. Do you remember what he said?

Let’s keep this simple. Hold up one of your hands. If your like my Grandpa Smith, who only had four fingers, hold up the hand that has five fingers. Now, here is a simple teaching about how to keep God at the center and learn how to love Christ above all:

Pray 5 times a day (in the morning, at mealtimes, and at bedtime).

Read 5 verses of the Bible each day. (I’d suggest you read a Psalm and then read 5 verses in another book of the Bible.)

Practice 5 random acts of kindness each week.

Practice 5 acts of generosity each month (along with learning to give generously to God as a central part of your worship life).

Let others know you are Christian, doing that in a humble, loving, genuine way that doesn’t push people away but draws them in towards Jesus, and invite 5 people to join you in worship or in your small group each year.

5.

I’ve asked Lindsey about the possibility of putting the number “5” around our building and on our worship programs. What to intentionally keep God at the center, and learn how to love Jesus above all, remember the 5...practice the 5...and see what God does in your life.

5 Bible verses a day.

5 moments of prayer each day.

5 acts of kindness and service each week.

5 acts of generosity each month, along with making generous, sacrificial giving a part of your weekly worship life.

5 invitations to others to join you in worship and in your small group (whether that meets in a classroom here at the church, at a local brew pub or coffee house, or at an area state park campground).

The Smell of the Beach: the Fragrance of Grace

This past week I, along with Wayne and Tim, visited the children in our School of Early Learning for Chapel Time. Tim and Wayne are amazing. They bring books to read and all sorts of resources. I just show up and tell stories about Jesus, or Paul, or Silas, and then we pray together and some of the children show me their shirts and their boots and tell me where they went last week.

In my visit to one of the classrooms, I talked with the children about going to the beach. Don't ask me how I made a connection between going to the beach and the story of Paul and Silas singing praise songs in prison in the middle of the night: we ended up talking about the beach.

Which I started thinking about as I took my walk on Wednesday night. When I was walking, I asked myself the questions "Will it make any difference?" and "Will we be different?" I also found myself thinking about going to the beach. With our children.

Remember what it was like, after you had been at the beach with your children, and you had driven home. When you got to the beach, you made sure the kids were covered up with sunscreen before they got in the water. And, if you were paying attention, you reapplied the sunscreen a time or two during the day.

They were in the sun. They were in the sand. They were in the water. They were in the wind that came blowing off Lake Michigan or the Gulf of Mexico.

Then, you rinsed them off in the freshwater shower at the dressing area before you got them into a clean t-shirt and shorts, and bundled them into the car. You drove home. The sky turned dark as the sun left the sky. The Michigan or Indiana or Florida fields passed in the dark as your car headed down the highway.

When you pulled into the driveway, you opened the back door of the SUV or the station wagon or the van, and you lifted your little ones out of the car to carry them into the house...into their bedrooms.

And it had been hours since they were in the water, since they were playing in the sand, since you had applied sunscreen, but as you hold your child close you can

smell it all on them: you can smell the sunscreen and the wind and the water. The fragrance of the place lingers on them. It clings to them.

So I was thinking about those kinds of moments, as I walked the neighborhood on Wednesday night, and I wondered if the world can tell that we have been to Jesus. I wondered if we have spent so much time with him that the world can smell the devotion on us, the peace of Christ on us, the courage of faith on us, the radical generosity of God on us, the amazing grace of the Creator on us?

You go to the beach, you get in the water, you play in the sun, and the smell of it clings to you. Does the fragrance of faith cling to us so that others pick it up in the ways we speak and think and love and serve and hang together through the messy times?

One of my first Sundays here, I mentioned that the a student or disciple of a teacher in Palestine was to follow so close behind the Teacher that the dust thrown up by the sandals of the Teacher would settle all over the student. Are we so close to Jesus that the dust he kicks up, the truth he stirs up, settles all over us...gets in our hair and eyes and nostrils and clothes?

Let Love Invade You

Jesus, in Matthew 5:13, tells the disciples that they are the salt of the earth. They are God's seasoning of truth and grace and love and justice and peacemaking. God's preservative for all that is good and true and beautiful and just.

"But if salt has lost its taste," Jesus asks, "How can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

I wondered, Wednesday night, as I was walking, whether the church has lost its saltiness. Do we work and play by the same rules others do in the dog-eat-dog, eye-for-an-eye-and-tooth-for-a-tooth, one-who-dies-with-the-most-toys-wins world outside the Jesus community. Are we any different?

Carlo Carretto, a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus community in North Africa, who lived much of his life among Muslims, wrote this: "I can only say, 'Live love, let love invade you. It will never fail to teach you what you must do.'"

If we are to be God's salt in the world, the only way to do that is to live love. The only way to do that is to let love invade us. Because these are uncertain times. These are times when even the church of Jesus is tempted to be a judgmental, closed, exclusive, self-serving religious association.

In the first three Sundays of June, we are going to spend three Sundays talking about the pandemic. *After the Covid Exile* is the title of the sermon series, and we're going to talk about what we have lost and what we have found during the last year and

a half. We'll spend one Sunday morning exploring what we have learned. And the last week we will talk together about how we will be different going forward.

My prayer for our church, and for each of us individually, is that we will live love and let the love (of Christ) invade us. In this new, coming chapter, I pray to God we will let love teach us what we must do.

Back to the earlier reference to *A River Runs Through It* and the novelist's observation that learning to cast -like learning grace- comes only through repetition and it is not learned easily: remember where we started today?

I love those lines where Maclean talks about picking up God's rhythm: *As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty.*

Stopping.

What do you need to do to pick up God's rhythms...learn God's way...and live it out? What works for you?

One of the keys, according to scripture, in being fully alive and staying connected with God, loving Jesus above all else, is stopping. Another word for that is sabbath.

God gives us the gift of sabbath so that we have permission to stop for twenty-four hours once every seven days.

This morning's scripture reading from Luke gives us that beautiful picture of Jesus visiting in the home of Mary and Martha. Jesus is, I think, weary from all of the preaching and healing, and Mary understands he just needs to talk. So she stops. She listens.

Sabbath can be that one day each seven days when we stop, and we can also have small sabbath moments in the middle of each day. All of those help us keep God at the center. Some of those "mini sabbaths" may be those moments when we pray, or those moments when we soak up what God has to say to us in five verses of scripture, or those moments when we practice kindness or generosity.

The Four Parts of Sabbath.

Peter Scazzerro, in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Life*, has a whole chapter on Sabbath as one key to a healthy life.

He reminds us we were built as creatures who need one day a week to take care of chores, and then we need another day each week to stop. Breathe. Worship. Play with God. Hang out with friends. One description of it is a "no obligation day."

Scazerro, this New York pastor who went through his own crisis because of his own need to keep producing for God without a break, says we not only need a day of Sabbath but we need Sabbath moments in the middle of every day.

Sabbath, Scazerro says, involves four things.

First, Sabbath is stopping. Just stopping.

Second, Sabbath is resting. Being playful and non-productive. Letting God handle the universe while we play or pray or nap or walk. Sabbath means having faith that God is big enough to handle the world while we stop for a day or an hour.

Third, Sabbath is delighting in life's blessings. Little ones and big ones. I like getting up early, walking outside to get the paper, looking up and noticing the stars. It is always a sweet moment for me. I like the feel of clean sheets on the bed. When I have been water skiing I love the feeling of leaning as far out as I can, holding onto the rope with just one hand, and then letting go. Slowing to a stop on the surface of the lake and settling down into the water. Sabbath is delighting in life's blessings. Sabbath is noticing.

Fourth, Sabbath is focusing on God. Letting God's presence and goodness and truth and love soak into us. Sabbath is focusing on God.

When our granddaughter, Ella, was little she made it very clear early that when I came to her house I was to hang out with her. One of the things I really like to do is read newspapers. I read the local paper. I read the New York Times and I liked picking up USA Today when was over in Columbus.

So I would show up at Ella's house, sit down on the couch in their living room, and open up a newspaper. I just loved reading that paper! Ella would start dancing around, talking to me, and I would tell her it would be just a minute.

Ella would climb up on the couch with me, we would talk a little, and I would go back to my paper. And -suddenly- the two hands of that two year old would smack the paper out of my hands. Crumple it up before I could even move. Then, she would look at me with a triumphant smile. I think she was smacking the paper out of my hand as her way of saying, "You are here to spend time with me!" Sabbath is focusing on God.

We stop to get in touch with the rhythms of God one day a week, and then every other day we are commanded to finding stopping moments. Soul breathing moments. When we pray or focus on a verse of scripture or open our eyes to what is around us... what is happening inside us.

Developing a rhythm that works for us so that we stay connected to God and love Christ above all else: that is the invitation God is giving us.

5 times a day praying.

5 verses a day from the Bible.

5 acts of kindness each week.

5 acts of generosity each month.

5 invitations to others this year to join you in worship or at your small group or the gathering of your circle friends.

Will it make any difference?

How will we change?

I can't wait to see how we'll answer those questions.