

## ***THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY LIFE: Looking Beneath the Surface.***

*Hebrews 4:7-13; John 20:19-31*

*Ogden Dunes Community Church*

*June 22, 2025 The Rev. Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher*

### **BIG OCEAN**

It's a big ocean.

That's why I was interested in snorkeling off Maui, in the Pacific, over the cone of an extinct volcano. The idea of putting on goggles and looking down beneath the surface, seeing what was invisible on the surface, was exciting.

It's a big ocean.

One of the crazy things about going snorkeling is how awkward it is getting in the water. Walking with flippers doesn't feel like a natural thing to do, you know? 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.

Maybe this journey we are about to take together will not only be exciting but feel a little odd. We may flop around a bit, or walk backward, or drop off the boat, to see what is going on in terms of the feelings beneath the surface of our lives.

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! Or a mile 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.

Feelings can be like that. You do your best to avoid them, but then when you stop, slow down, and take the time to look beneath the surface, they come up your way even as you paddle backwards trying to avoid them.

It's a big ocean.

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

### **THE SERIES**

We're beginning a series of messages titled *The Emotionally Healthy Life* this morning. It's a series I began planning over six months ago.

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 is an underlying assumption Peter Scazzerro makes about our faith life and our emotional life: **emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable.** We can't be spiritual mature without being emotionally healthy.

## THE QUESTION

There are two things Scazzerro says that have stuck with me, ever since I first read this book over fifteen years ago.

The first was a question asked by a young woman named Angela. Angela had not attended church for over five years. The whole subject of emotionally healthy spirituality puzzled her. **"Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?"** she asked. Scazzerro talks about how people of faith finally give up on church because they get weary of people who have the right beliefs but are either miserable or make other people miserable. He describes people in church who have the "right knowledge" of God, use the right words, but are "angry, compulsive, highly opinionated, defensive, proud, and too busy to love the Jesus they professed (to follow.)"

"Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?" That question won't let go of me.

## THE "I QUIT"

The other story Scazzerro tells is the one about the night his wife announced that she was leaving him and leaving the church. Maybe I remember that story because my own need to please people led me to say "Yes" too often until I was nearly empty inside. And maybe I remember that story Scazzerro tells because my need to please meant I was wired to avoid hard truth and hesitate to preach hard truth.

In the story of his own life, Pastor Scazzerro talks about how his church was growing, how he was leading prayer ministries, how the small groups at the church were thriving, and yet he was not experiencing any joy. He was frustrated and overworked and anxious. He was also bitter and depressed. For five years he did his best to do the work of three or four people.

He would preach two services in English in the morning, and one service in the afternoon in Spanish. Then, his associate pastor, led the Spanish congregation out of the church. He took two hundred of the two hundred and thirty people attending the afternoon service. Scazzerro found himself hating the departed associated pastor, and tired -without success- to forgive him.

There was a growing gap between the faith he professed and his own life experience.

Geri, his wife, was lonely. She was, for all intents and purposes, raising their four daughters alone. She wanted more from the marriage, had brought the subject up again and again, confronting Peter. Finally, she couldn't accept his excuses or delays or his inability to say "No" anymore.

So late one evening, as he was sitting on their bed reading, Geri walked into the bedroom and calmly said, **"Pete, I'd be happier single than married to you.** I am getting off this roller-coaster. I love you but refuse to live this way anymore. I have

waited...I have tried talking to you. You aren't listening. I can't change you. That is up to you. But I am getting on with my life."

There was a pause.

Then, Geri said, "**Oh, yes, by the way, the church you pastor? I quit. Your leadership isn't worth following.** You can't seem to say 'No.' You won't take the risk. You don't have the courage. You love everyone else but are miserable at loving and making time for your family...and yourself."

Peter was stunned. A part of him wanted to strangle her.

Then, he realized Geri had said the most loving thing she had ever said to him: his lack of emotional health was distorting his whole life...and his relationship with God.

Scazerro remembers thinking, "While I sincerely loved Jesus Christ and believed many truths about him, **I was an emotional infant unwilling to look at my immaturity.**"

## THE LIST

In his book, Scazerro provides us with this list of what Emotionally Unhealthy Spirituality looks like:

### EMOTIONALLY UNHEALTHY SPIRITUALITY:

1. Using God to run from God
2. Ignoring the emotions of anger, sadness, and fear
3. Dying to the wrong things
4. Denying the past's impact on our present
5. Dividing our lives into "secular" and "sacred" compartments
6. Doing for God instead of being with God.
7. Spiritualizing away conflict
8. Covering over brokenness, weakness and failure
9. Living without limits
10. Judging other people's spiritual journey

-Peter Scazerro in Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (p. 24)

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.

## OUR FAMILIES

Why are some -many?- of us so determined not to feel? Why are some -many?- of us so afraid to look beneath the surface? How is it we focus on getting our religious beliefs right, our Biblical knowledge right, but we are okay with living like emotional infants?

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!"

Scazerro talks about our tendency to focus on facts as the engine that pulls the train of our lives. Feelings are not to be trusted, and left to bring up the rear.

I remember a woman telling me about the time she was getting on her prom dress. She had worked and worked to get everything just right. Dress. Make-up.

Hair. She walked out into the living room where her dad was sitting. “Don’t I look beautiful, Daddy?” she said. Her father looked up and said, “You should never say something like that. Talking that about yourself like that is vanity.” She turned around and walked out of the room. It was a moment when she learned it really wasn’t okay in her family to feel good about yourself...to lean back and exult in the good thing God did when God put you together. Joy was something not to celebrate but about which to feel guilty.

***What were the messages you received in your family about feelings?***

## **FAITH COMMUNITIES**

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.

Peter Scazzero tells not only his own story in his book but he tells the stories of others. Roger was a man who had a passion for the church and for God and for ministry. He was a pastor of a church that was growing. The budget tripled. “Inside,” Roger now admits, “I was blind to my own emptiness and emotional abyss.” After every monthly church board meeting Roger would cry and physically tremble. Whenever he tried to talk with people about his struggles, whenever he tried to seek a deeper, more authentic relationship with God and the people around him, he felt like people in the church were telling him, “Your life should be together now.”

So he resigned. He walked away. Roger says this: “For me the church was always a place where I felt I had to be guarded about the deepest, darkest things about myself. It was never a safe place.”

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.

## **GOD IN THE FLESH: FEELINGS**

One of the most beautiful passages in all of scripture is the 1<sup>st</sup> 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.

And 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. Just choose the Gospel of John. Look at Jesus. He was no stranger to the emotional side of life!

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of John Jesus is at a **wedding reception**. His Mom, being a typical Jewish mother, tells him to go ahead and turn the water into wine. Take care of the wedding party. Jesus says, "Woman, why are you getting me involved in this?" You can hear a son's irritation with his mother's willingness to tell him what his next move ought to be.

Later on in that same chapter Jesus goes into the Jerusalem temple area. He finds merchants doing business in the name of God. And they are cheating people. John tells us Jesus made **a whip of cords** and drove the cheats out of the temple courts. He scattered the coins of the money changers and knocked their tables over. (If you're not careful you may hear this story and want to cast Clint Eastwood in the role of Jesus...)

In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John Jesus has made his way to Bethany. His friend, Lazarus, has died. When Jesus sees how grief stricken the sisters of Lazarus are, when he sees how the neighbors and friends of Lazarus weep over their friend's death, Jesus -according to John 11:33- "*was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*" Then, verse 35 simply says "**Jesus wept.**"

There is the moment in Matthew 21, during that last week of Jesus' earthly life and ministry, when he was leaving Jerusalem and heading out to Bethany for a night of rest. Jesus had been going toe-to-toe with the big city preacher boys who were trying to trick him up, get him in all kinds of trouble, and as he heads out to Bethany for the night he passes a fig tree. Jesus is hungry. He goes up to the **fig tree** looking for something to eat. And there isn't any fruit on the tree at all. The tree looks good but it isn't bearing fruit. The tree looks fine. Sort of proud of itself, I imagine. Standing there along the road between Jerusalem and Bethany. Right there near all that traffic going by every day. Looking fine. The tree is feeling pretty good about looking good. People walk by and say, "Isn't that a fine looking tree?" But Jesus doesn't find any fruit on the tree.

Jesus does two things you might think Jesus would never do: he speaks to the tree and he **curse the tree**: "*May you never bear fruit again!*" he shouts. Matthew tells us immediately the tree withered. Kind of surprising, isn't it? I suppose that fig tree just represented, for Jesus, a world where too many of God's people don't bear fruit. They don't bear the fruit of truth or grace or justice or peace or healing or faith or love. All those pretty people, blessed with so much, on a first name basis with God, and not bearing fruit! It broke the heart of Jesus and so, at the end of a long day, Jesus curses a fig tree!

*"The Word became flesh."*

## **JESUS FEELS & KNOWS**

Now you need to know something else about Jesus: not only does he feel, not only does he get tired and mad and scared and glad, not only does he feel compassion

and not only is he tempted, but Jesus looks beneath the surface. Jesus is in touch with what is going on down deep in his heart...his gut.

Luke 4 tells Jesus is out in the wilderness and he is tempted. Jesus knows what is going on. He knows he is at a very vulnerable moment. He and the devil are having a conversation. Jesus is thoughtfully, prayerfully, turning over his options...thinking through whose he will be and who he will be and what his life is all about.

Then, later in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Jesus has been healing people. Jesus is aware of his own weariness, his own hunger for God, that we're told he goes out at daybreak to a lonely place to pray.

When Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane he is very much aware of what is going on down deep beneath the surface. Matthew 26:38 reports that Jesus is able to put what he is feeling into words as he talks with Peter, James, and John: *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."*

Jesus not only feels but Jesus is in touch with what he is feeling...whether joy or sadness, strength or weakness.

He knows you can't try to love God, live with God, and leave your emotions behind. Because what you are feeling is a part of who you are. And God loves you, right? Isn't that what the cross at the front of this room means?

The Word became flesh.

Jesus feels...he has emotions. He knows what mad and sad and glad and scared and happy look like...feel like.

And he is very aware of what is going on down deep. Because Jesus knows that if you don't pay attention to your feelings, if you don't pay attention to what is going on down beneath the surface, those unrecognized feelings can take over...turn you upside-down.

Do you remember what we said as we started out this morning?

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

What does that look like? What does it mean?

It means **being aware** of what is going on in us.

Over these next few weeks, God is going to invite us to become more aware of what we are feeling...what is going on inside.

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.

One night we walked into the Morris Civic Auditorium in South Bend. My Dad had given us tickets to the symphony. We arrived. Slipped into our seats and the first piece on the program was Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man." I found myself sitting there so desperately thankful for the beauty of the music that there were tears on my cheeks. That was embarrassing. I wiped them away and let the music flow over me and penetrate someplace inside that needed to be reached. I wasn't sure what was going on but I knew whatever it was I needed to pay attention to 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.

There are moments when you look down, you look inside, and you are aware of joy. Those are wonderful moments to recognize and claim!

One Spring day long ago, when my granddaughter Ella was about four, a light rain had been falling as we walked around the church grounds at Elkhart Trinity. There were some small puddles, pools of water, in a few low-lying places in the blacktop, and she began to splash in them, clapping her hands together, and spinning. So I decided it was a good idea to take off my sandals, and we both splashed in the puddles, clapped our hands, and spun in circles.

Why do you suppose I remember that moment? Why do you supposed it is so clear, so vivid, so real to me all these years later?

There is the love for Ella, certainly. That is a large part of it.

It is also the joy of it. The joy of that moment is a gift I carry with me. I always will.

Slow down. Be aware. Be curious.

Be curious. Bringing along our emotions also means being curious about what God is doing in your life. Ask the question, "What is Jesus trying to change in me? How is Jesus trying to grow me...heal me?" Sometimes the tug and the pull, is a sign that God is up to something in us.

Paul says that in Christ we are becoming a new creation (2nd Corinthians 5). Becoming a new creation doesn't happen without some struggle, labor pains, coaching, encouraging, and exhaustion mixed with joy.

Be curious about what God is up to in you...what Jesus is trying to change.

## **GOD LOVES US: WE CAN BE REAL**

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 I am. 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.

You are so loved that you can be real.

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