

THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY LIFE: Letting Go of Control (and Being Real)

2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Luke 15:11-32

Ogden Dunes Community Church

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Folks tend to very quiet when they hear someone read the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Some Bible scholars have another name for this story: *the Parable of the Waiting Father*.

The story begins. We get quiet. If you didn't know better, you might say a whole bunch of us *have lived this story*.

You know the story, don't you?

The younger boy had insisted on his share of their dad's estate. He wanted the part of the family business that would come to him when their dad died. Most fathers would have ignored the request. Or told the boy to work hard and wait.

The father didn't do that. The father talked his attorney, his money manager, and gave the boy what he could. Drew down the cash reserves of the business, postponed the purchase of some needed equipment, and gave the boy his money.

The younger boy had taken his money and disappeared. Dropped off the face of the earth. They'd heard from now and then. He'd be in one big city and then another: New York, Las Vegas, Rio. Then, things got quiet. No letters or phone calls or texts. Nothing.

Now he was back. With his tail between his legs. Choking out some silly story about being sorry.

And the father, instead of using this return as a teaching moment, instead of lecturing the boy, instead of demanding to know what lessons he has learned and how he will act differently in the future, has a Patagonia jacket brought out for the boy, puts a pair of brand-new, top-of-the-line men's sandals on his feet, slips the family ring back on the younger boy's finger, and wraps the boy up in a hug before the defeated one can say "I'm sorry." The father tells one of the foreman to call Wagner's Ribs up in Porter, and have them down their portable grill because a party is about to break out.

You know how the older brother reacts. How he goes out to the garage and furiously works on the old International tractor they've been rebuilding. You know how he goes out to the half-darkened garage to get away from the party being thrown for his brother.

²⁸ *"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'*

A series of sermons could be preached on this parable, but I want to make this one observation: the father chooses to let go of his need to control everyone, his need

to control outcomes, his need to control the family dynamics, the relationship between his boys, and his need to control his image in the community.

The father could have laid down the law. Lectured the boy. Had him sign a covenant, outlining what he needed to do and making clear what he would not do, if he wanted to keep the ring, the robe, the sandals, and have the keys. The father could have done everything he could to prevent the boy from ever acting out ever again.

Control the boy: he doesn't try to control the boy.

I've known people who tried to control their children: what they did; what they thought. Sometimes that control happened through rules. Sometimes, even, parents would use the writing of the will to control their children.

He loves the boy home.

He graces the boy.

The father could have worked to **control the family dynamics**, keeping everything fair, keeping everyone happy, making sure everyone was treated the same. We can see, even though Jesus leaves the parable unfinished, never telling us whether the older boy ever joined the party for his little brother, how grace risks exploding the family wide open. The father could have more carefully calibrated his response to the youngest boy's return, being kind but firm, making sure he didn't go over the top with such generosity that he would cause relationship-destroying outrage in the older boy.

Sometimes we work really, really hard to keep everything just right in our family, everyone happy. Who knows? Maybe people in the community, maybe our neighbors, will be fooled into thinking everything is always just right in our family.

The father could have realized that people in Kouts, and all over the county, would hear about his response to the youngest boy's outrageous, wasteful, self-destructive behavior. "He did what?" people would mutter to one another in the church parking lot before worship or over a cup of coffee in the fellowship hall. "Has he lost his mind? What kind of a lesson is he teaching that boy?" People at the grain elevator, dropping off their soybeans, would gather by the coffee pot, snort and growl, "Has he lost his mind? That man has no backbone at all!"

Be firm, look tough, and people will admire and respect you. Greet the boy with this kind of reception, and people are going to be talking. Most of the community will see you as a failure as a parent. As a perfect example of what is wrong with this new generation. You'll be a joke.

The father doesn't try and **control what people may think about him**. He doesn't work to control his reputation by looking tough and firm.

He decides to be gracious, to be shockingly gracious, and take the risk that he'll be a walking joke for the rest of his life.

He will not crush the reed that is already bruised, to quote Isaiah 42:3.

He will love the boy, give him the opportunity to live a new chapter, meet his failure with a shocking kind of grace, and let God sort out what happens next.

We're in this journey, exploring *The Emotionally Healthy Life*, and we've looked at the importance of emotions, the power of curiosity and courageous honesty, and

breaking free from past negative stuff. Today, we'll talk for a few minutes about letting go of the need to control.

Peter Scazzerro, in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, talks about these “**walls**” we face as we go through life. Another word for “wall” is the word “crisis.” Which is where this single parent-household is in the story: the father and his boys are in a crisis. There are facing a wall.

The wall, the crisis, turns our world upside-down. It may be the loss of a job, the death of a close friend or family member, a diagnosis of cancer, a church relationship that crumbles into disillusionment and betrayal, a divorce, an accident, or a dark night of the soul with God.

We have more questions than answers.

Our faith doesn't seem to work like it once did.

We're not sure what to think about God, how God works, or if we can even trust the idea of God anymore.

These heart-breaking walls, these crises, are not caused by God but they can -if we don't try to deny them or pretend they're not happening- bring us to a place and a life that is more real.

I won't go into detail, but several years after retirement my life was good in many ways but inside I was working through a wall. The rest of the world -at least most of the world- didn't know I was in a tough place. Living by myself in a four bedroom house, leading a congregation as it recovered from a crisis and found new joy, I was working hard to keep my pain private. I was praying. I kept working with a good Roman Catholic, Italian counselor in South Bend. Even during COVID, we continued to meet via Zoom. There were times when I was curled up on my couch, as I felt something slipping away. Or maybe it had been gone for a long time, and I was struggling to face that...accept that.

Nothing I could do or say seemed to make things right. I had come to understand some hard truth about what was and what needed to change.

I had often looked like I had it all together, in my life.

But I knew the truth.

Then, on the other side of the wall, life was better. More real. I didn't realize how much I had changed, but people who knew me said I was a different person. They said I was more present. More relaxed. More human.

Do you know one of the great mistakes I made in my life? I worked so very hard to be in control. To make it look like things were fine. This need to be in control even kept me from speaking the uncomfortable, destabilizing truth. *Some courageous truth along the way might have made a difference.*

You see, when you are a pastor, you're not supposed to be in crisis. Things are supposed to be okay. You are a divinely-sent expert in being okay, aren't you?

Do you know what is funny? I had worked so hard to hide the pain, hide the relationship that was broken, and I finally sent my 80 year old Dad an email note telling him where I was. I thought my Dad would be shocked because, after all, I consider myself a pretty good actor. My Dad sent a note back. He didn't shame me or sound surprised."Oh, Mark," he said in his note, "I saw that thirty years ago."

There was a time when, in Elkhart, we preached a series of sermons on courage. As a part of the series, we filmed me doing a static line parachute jump from 4,000 feet over Goshen. I was able to jump out of that airplane, stepping out and then letting go, but somehow -in my own life- I found it hard to let go of the need to control people and events and...my own image.

As we wrap up this morning, there are several things worth observing.

Trying to pretend we have everything under control, and we know everything about God, is exhausting. It's like trying to wear a pair of pants that have a 34 inch waist when you really need pants with a 36 inch waist. You go around holding your breath.

And, as we have already noted, you're not fooling people. If they are paying attention, many people see right through our game of pretend.

Here is another point: to stop pretending and trying to control everything and everyone means **GREATER BROKENNESS**. Paul says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The apostle also says, referring to himself, that he is a common, cracked pot.

When we are working hard to prove that we have it all together, to control our image, to maintain the illusion of perfection, its exhausting and it will mean we are thin skinned. We regard every honest critique as a threat.

But when we come to terms with who we really are, and claim our identity as a common cracked pot, we don't have to work so hard to defend ourselves. When someone says, "You're kind of a mess", we don't snap back. We shrug and say, "I learned that about myself a long time ago."

We know we are imperfect. Flawed. Unfinished.

So we spend less energy judging others.

And we can spend less energy and time being defensive.

A third point: to let go of the need to control, and living a pretend life, we have a **GREATER APPRECIATION FOR MYSTERY**.

We begin to know what we don't know.

Some of us like to think we have it all figured out. Some of us act as if we have God all figured out.

But God is very big. Life is mysterious. And there is a lot we don't know, honestly.

St Augustine wrote, "If you understand, it is not God you understand."

The Apostle Paul wrote, in 1st Corinthians 13, that in this life we see God through darkly tinted glass. "Now we know in part," St. Paul insists.

When you realize you don't have all the answers, and you don't know all mysteries, you open to what the church fathers referred to as "Holy Unknowing."

We become more open to, and respectful of, the mystery of life and God.

Maybe another word for that is "humility." Or openness to divine surprises.

The fourth observation Scazzerro makes is this: to stop living a pretend life, and trying to control everyone and everything, is to discover a **GREATER ABILITY TO WAIT ON GOD**.

Isn't it interesting how often, in scripture, we see people waiting on God?

It takes brash, gifted, egotistical Joseph, in Genesis, years of waiting until he begins to see what God has been doing. Sold into slavery by his brothers, time spent serving an Egyptian officer and his household, months and months in prison where he is an interpreter of dreams, and then finally years as viceroy of Egypt pass before Joseph is able to see what is happening. It isn't until his father and brothers show up in Egypt that Joseph can sit back and see what God has done: "What you meant for evil," he says to his family, "God used for good."

When Jesus, after the resurrection, gathers his people together, he tells them to wait in Jerusalem until the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon them. They need the power of God, the glory and grace of God, filling them. Jesus tells them to wait.

The father in the Parable of the Waiting Father doesn't know how the story will end. He doesn't force things, though, but he leaves the story open for God to work.

We develop a greater ability to wait on God when we stop trying to control everything, and make everything happen when we want it to happen.

Fifth, and finally, we develop a **GREATER DETACHMENT**.

We begin to take on an eternal perspective.

We stop sweating the small stuff.

Things and moments don't own us or distract us from loving God and loving one another.

Do you remember how, in high school, things would derail you? Do you remember how your world seemed to end when you didn't make the basketball team, or the traveling band, or that one boy never seemed to notice you? Those things were forever important...big stuff. You would live or die over stuff.

After I earned a doctorate, I never bothered to put doctoral bars on my robe. Then, when I was appointed to a church in downtown Bloomington, I told a colleague I thought I would put those doctoral bars on the robe. I wanted to look like somebody, I guess, to that IU crowd.

My friend, when I told her what I was going to do, got quiet. Then, she said, "So you earned your doctorate over ten years ago, never bothered, and now you're going to put them on...for...what reason?"

I smiled, on my end of the phone, and said, "Oh, never mind."

No one really cared about the degree I had gotten up in Chicago. Bars on a robe? Just a silly distraction, for me, really.

Then, you grow up. And you begin to see that some of the things you thought were very important weren't that important at all.

When I drive by the old Studebaker complex in South Bend, I sometimes realize there were people in the design department or purchasing department who lost sleep at night with excitement because they got a promotion to Assistant Head of Design or they lost sleep because they were passed over. People's stomachs were wound in knots over stuff like that, and now the company is gone. All that chatter, all that static, all those distracting twists and turns, all those moments when people missed God and what was really important.

Life has a way of teaching us what is important and what is not.

We can declutter as we go along, and leave more room for interior space where there is room for God...and deep truth.

Is it okay not be perfect?
Is it okay not to be always under control?
Is it okay to be someone who doesn't have all the answers?
Is it okay to be honest...to be real?

Several years ago in a church staff meeting I asked that team a question. I asked, "How are you doing?" There was silence and then one of our team members began to tell me about his area of ministry. I listened until he was done and then I said, "I didn't ask about *what* you were doing but I asked *how* you were doing in your work. What you are getting done. We'll get to that. We are always good at getting to do what we do. I want to know how you are doing: how is your heart and soul?"

So we talked for a bit.

And then I told them that the previous year had been the toughest year in my life -with the exception of the years when a member of my immediate family had died. I told them that year was the toughest year of my life. That every time I turned around I seemed to be facing a challenge that nearly did me in. Other than the birth of Ella, there wasn't much good in that year as I looked back.

The room got quiet. Because I am pretty good at hiding how badly I hurt when I hurt. And they didn't know. Not really. They didn't know there were days when I was just "gutting it out." Throwing myself at God and just hanging on. They didn't know that and I had done a good job of hiding it.

I told them I just hum along when things are really tough. I show up. I can be wrecked inside and show up, work hard, deal with stuff, smile, and go home. I just keep going.

The day I shared the depth of my brokenness with my church team? It may have been one of the lowest points in my ministry. Or one of the best moments.

God's light and love have a way of shining out of the darkness of our human lives.

Is it okay not to be always under control? Is it okay to hurt? Is it okay to have ragged edges? Is it okay to be honest...to be real?

I've been thinking about the father this week.

He could have tried to control everything, but he didn't do that.

The father decided to love. Just love. And trust to God to work. Let God work out the details, figuring out what came next.

What counted was not looking right, or impressing his neighbors, or being in control, or pretending he knew exactly what to do: what counted...was loving the boy who had come home. And, also, loving the boy who was seething with self-righteousness, standing out there in the shadows.

Love them both, the father did. And let God work...