

**THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY LIFE:
Loving Well (Even When Love is Messy).**

Matthew 9:1-13 August 10, 2025

Ogden Dunes Community Church

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Bertoldo di Giovanni has been on my mind this week. Bertoldo -we'll call him "Bert" if that is okay with you- was an Italian sculptor and medalist. Genius may be a gift from God, genius may be something you have or you don't have, but Giovanni's ability as an artist was shaped by his time studying with the great Donatello. Some art historians say Donatello was the greatest sculptor in 15th century Florence.

Giovanni, who learned his craft from Donatello, was not only a friend of the influential Medici family but he was a part of their household. Curator over a large art collection.

Lorenzo de' Medici -sometimes known as Lorenzo the Magnificent- had founded a school for sculptors and painters at the Palazzo Medici, and Giovanni had been made head of the school and master teacher. One of Bert's students was a 15-year old named Michelangelo. Michelangelo was invited to stay at the palace and study under Giovanni.

While he was in the school, working under Giovanni's direction, Michelangelo produced two marble reliefs, *Madonna of the Stairs* and *Battle of the Centaurs*. If you look at *Madonna of the Stairs* you can see the influence of Donatello.

Donatello taught Giovanni. Modeled what works and what doesn't when it comes to creating great art.

Giovanni taught Michelangelo.

And you can see the influence of Donatello in some of the work of Michelangelo.

That's how we learn to live and to be, isn't it?

We watch someone else who we think really knows what they're doing.

Donatello teaches Giovanni.

Giovanni teaches Michelangelo.

And you can see the influence of Donatello in the work of young Michelangelo.

That's how it goes.

You see this in the sports world.

When Dick Fosbury was on the high school track team in Medford, Oregon, he was having a terrible time competing in the high jump. In those days almost every high jumper would approach the bar and use something called the "saddle method." The athlete would run towards the bar, go over the bar face down, and maneuver each of their legs over the bar. They would go over the high jump bar chest first and their legs would follow.

Fosbury didn't have much luck with the traditional approach. So the high school athlete began to experiment. Eventually, he developed a method where he would go over the bar backwards, arching his back to get over the bar, and kick his legs up in the air at the end of the jump. It worked! In his junior year he broke his own high school's record in the high jump and in his senior year he came in second at the state

championships. After graduation he went off Oregon State where he won the NCAA title. By the time Fosbury competed at the Olympics in 1968 he won a gold medal and set a new Olympic record.

High jumpers all over the world began copying the “Fosbury flop.”

We learn by watching someone who, we think, has got it right.

Here we are on the last weekend of our series of messages on **“The Emotionally Healthy Life.”** We began with the observation that spiritual maturity and emotional health are connected. Some people have faith, they read the Bible, they talk God talk, they participate in the life of the church, but they are self-centered, critical, negative, controlling and unforgiving. (*Did I leave anything out?*) To be spiritually mature we need to take seriously the importance of being emotionally healthy.

So we, blessed by some of the insights from Peter Scazzero in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, have been exploring the basic principles of emotional health. We’ve said that being emotionally healthy means we need to:

- **Look beneath the surface of life and be aware of what is going on inside us.**
- **Understand who we are and how we are wired and how we have been gifted.**
- **Break the power of the past. Not just keep replaying the past or letting old hurts control us.**
- **Let go of control and let God be God. Live in brokenness and vulnerability. Risk giving up the myth of perfection. Admit that as beloved as we may be by God we are all unfinished, imperfect, and rough-around-the-edges.**
- **Receive the gift of limits. Face the fact that we can’t be everywhere all the time. We can’t do everything we might want to do or everything everyone else wants us to do. It’s okay to say, “No.”**
- **Stop for a day of Sabbath each week and for Sabbath moments in the middle of each day. Stop, rest, delight in the miracle of life and the blessings we have, and hang out with God. When we don’t stop we drift off course. Life gets “flat” and we are at risk emotionally, relationally, physically and spiritually.**

The last step in being emotionally healthy is to follow the model of Jesus when it comes to knowing how to **love**.

In that beautiful verse from the Prologue to John’s Gospel (1:14, TNIV), we are told that in Jesus the way God loves is made visible to us: *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.*

In his paraphrase of the New Testament, this is how Eugene H. Peterson says it: ***The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.***

I was asked, once, to help with a wedding that took place on a beach in St. John in the Virgin Islands. That's where the bride grew up.

Although someone else was officiating, they asked me to say a "few words."

The wedding was beautiful. It took place on a beach at Cinnamon Bay at 5 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. The sky was slightly overcast which was a good thing for us all. The air, which had been very still, was suddenly moving as a slight breeze began to blow. It was good.

I did my best to offer a few words of advice about this journey we call marriage. But I warned them that most likely they wouldn't remember anything I said. I did my best to talk about things like the importance of tending to the relationship, the importance of learning the art of forgiveness, the importance of community, but the most important thing I did was point them towards Jesus. Which is what I always do. I tell couples to keep their eyes on Jesus. Take their cues about what love looks like, what love does, what love doesn't do, what love says, what love doesn't say, from Jesus.

We are healthy, the church is a healthy community, when we make a decision that we will ask God to help us love the way Jesus loves. Scazzerro says we are called to make the incarnation, God taking on flesh in Jesus, our way of loving.

God entered the world in Jesus. And God calls us to love people by taking a risk and entering their world. *Being with them.*

We stood on the beach and I the best I could do was point them towards Jesus.

Donatello instructs Giovanni.

Giovanni shows Michelangelo how art is done.

Young Michelangelo goes to work and you can see the influence of Donatello in what he does.

We watch someone...we listen to someone...and that is how we learn to do life. Whether we are fly fishing, cooking Pad Thai, tying a tie, growing roses, or designing a web site: we watch and listen and then we do.

The Bible reading today is from the **9th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew**. If you have a Bible with you this morning you might open it up to that section of Matthew.

God is love and that love becomes visible, we see it made real, in the flesh of Jesus.

In this chapter we hear about the call of Matthew the tax collector. Tax collectors were less popular in first century Palestine than the IRS is today! Tax collectors in those days worked with the Romans. They collected the money that kept the evil empire running. They were hated! So the decision makes to call Matthew as a disciple is shocking. Still, Jesus sees something in the tax collector named Matthew and invites him to follow...be a disciple.

Matthew is pretty happy about this invitation. So he ends up throwing a party! I imagine he has a DJ in, and there is a guy who shows up with a grill to make some Gyros, and there are kegs of root beer and stuff sitting by the back door. Everyone who is a big nobody shows up! Matthew says other tax collectors and sinners show up. If you're respectable then you're not there!

The Pharisees are standing nearby, I imagine, watching the party spread out into the street. There is so much joy in Matthew's heart because of the new life he is

having with Jesus that only a loud, rambunctious, almost-out-of-control party is the only acceptable instrument of praise. Imagine that. I wonder how many of us, on the Sunday we joined the church, I wonder how many of us the first time we experienced the full grace of God, we're so out of our minds with gladness that we threw a party that drew the attention of the police...

The bass line from the stereo is rattling the dishes in their kitchens. I imagine the police show up and ask Matthew to hold the noise down to a low roar.

The Pharisees are standing on the edge of the lawn, watching all this, and they asked the disciples of Jesus (:11), "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*"

Again, they don't say this to Jesus but he understands what they are saying. He can see that this crazy collection of people, who are so rough-around-the-edges polite society would never give them the time of day, just disgusts respectable, religious folks.

Jesus picks up the signals. Knows what they are thinking and saying.

Instead of trying to convince them the people at the party are respectable in their own right, instead of trying to persuade the polite, respectable folks that the people lining up for the barbecued lamb aren't as bad as they look, Jesus says this (:12): "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*"

Jesus hears what his critics are saying. How can we love and honor a righteous and holy God if we are hanging out with people whose lives are loud, dirty, broken, and immoral?

Jesus knows what they have said, he knows what they are thinking, *and he disagrees with them*. Jesus listens, he hears, and then he carefully states his own position.

The disciples of John come to Jesus, a little later, and ask why he doesn't fast like most prophets and teachers. Jesus listens and says that the right thing for him to do, when he is alive on the earth, is to party with people. Because there will be a day when people can't party with Jesus.

Then, Jesus points out that when there is a new thing, when there is new truth, when God shows us a new way, it is like new wine. And new wine must go into new **wineskins**. If you put new wine in old wineskins, the wine will expand, and the skins will tear.

So Jesus is saying, "I know you expect religious teachers to be serious and somber, only drinking water and eating a low-fat, low-salt, vegan diet but I like to laugh and drink sweet tea and eat barbecue and finish the meal off with home made apple pie. I'm sort of a 'live life to the fullest' kind of person and I just love hanging out with people. So sorry if you don't like the laughing and the hanging out and the partying, but that is the way I am."

In the what Jesus does and says in the 8th and 9th chapters of Matthew, we see what it looks like to love the way Jesus loves.

First, if we are going to love the way Jesus loves we are going to go to people. Jesus is on the move. Jesus doesn't wait for people to come to him. Jesus goes out and he enters the world people live in.

Peter Scazzerro talks about how he and his wife just didn't minister in a pretty tough section of New York City, but they moved their family into the neighborhood. In every congregation I have served, there have been well-meaning people who ask how we will get unchurched people to come to church. "We need to figure out a way to bring those folks in," he said. I usually respond, "Maybe we need to consider going to them. Not waiting on them to find their way inside the doors of this place, but go to them and love them, do life with them, where they are."

Second, to love is to listen.

To love as Jesus loves means we enter the world of other people. Not just where they live but what is going on inside their heart and mind. To do that one of the ways we express our love is by listening.

Did you notice, in the 8th and 9th chapters of Matthew, how carefully Jesus listens to people? How he has a clear sense of what they are saying and thinking?

To love well, to love the way Jesus loves, means we work to slow down enough that we hear one another. That we really listen to one another. That we do our best not to let our own agenda get in the way of hearing what someone else is saying...understand what they are feeling.

A healthy community is a place where we speak for ourselves. We don't triangle and go around saying "some people are saying." We speak for ourselves.

I remember speaking with a great and faithful lay leader, one time. As he described his church, and how people don't feel it is safe to speak up, he said, "There is so much passive aggressive stuff going on here that it drives me crazy."

A healthy community is a place where people work to practice "reflective listening." Where people are allowed to complete their thoughts.

Some of us are really good at that. Others of us have mastered the art of putting words together, getting our thoughts "out there," but we struggle with the listening side of love.

The church I was serving had an outstanding young woman named Andy who did children's ministries. Andy had a business degree, had worked in the lumber wholesale business, and never went to seminary. But she loved children and she loved Jesus and she came on our staff.

She was something!

One day a member of the church had really unloaded on her. The comments came out of the blue and weren't very fair. So she was feeling pretty overwhelmed.

I walked into her office, asked how she was doing, and she began to cry. She told me how cut up she felt. How defeated.

Standing next to her desk I immediately three possible strategies for responding. Like a lot of guys I tend to move very quickly to the "problem solving" side of things. So here I am going through this list of possible strategies, numbering them off on my fingers, and Andy is just sitting in her chair, tears streaming down her face, being very quiet.

I finally stopped.

"You don't need me to fix this for you, do you?" I asked.

She silently nodded her head, "Yes."

"You need me to slow down, close my mouth, and just listen don't you?" I said.

She nodded again.

So I took a breath. Sat down in the chair next to her desk. And I worked on listening rather than solving the “problems.”

To love well, to love the way Jesus loves, means listening to one another. Miracles happen in a community where people dare to listen to other people...letting them share their hearts and their thoughts and their doubts and their faith and their fears.

Third, to love well is to be able to enter the world of others without becoming them...remaining true to who we are, our thoughts, feelings, and convictions. Peter Scazzerro refers to this as “holding onto yourself.”

To love well, to love as Jesus loves, means we are able to enter the world of the people we are with but still be true to who we are and what we are thinking . What we are feeling.

Peter Scazzerro, in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, calls it “holding on to yourself.” He says the challenge is not losing ourselves when we enter another person’s world.

Jesus has an amazing way of understanding where people are, what they are thinking, what they value and expect, but he doesn’t let their expectations or ways of thinking control him: Jesus held on to himself. He knows who he is. He knows what his life is about. He knows what he is to do and what he isn’t to do.

Jesus loves people, he enters their world, and yet he holds onto himself.

Scazzerro says (pg. 185) this “is perhaps the most difficult, challenging principle to apply. It is the key to biblical conflict resolution. It is the key to responding in a mature, loving way when other people push and challenge your desires, values, and goals inside or outside the church. It is the key to serving as a leader....in any capacity...”

When we care about people it is very easy to do what they want us to do just to because we care about them. It is very easy to bend in the direction of their values and expectations and thinking. But to love well means not only entering the world of another but also being true to ourselves. Holding on to ourselves.

There was a night when I was in seminary. Working on a paper around 9:30 on a Wednesday night. The phone rang. It was a woman in the church choir. She had once been the choir director but had left the church. She then returned when I arrived. Now, the woman was singing in the choir and making quiet criticisms of the new director -right in the middle of practice.

So the phone rang and I picked it up.

“Pastor Mark,” the woman said, “I have had a terrible day and need you right here at my house tonight.”

“What happened, Betty?” I asked.

She told me the story. She had been making some comments about the director’s leadership, as the new director worked with another group in the choir, and Betty’s daughter -also singing in the choir- finally had had enough. \

“Tonight my daughter told me, in the middle of choir practice, in front of God and the whole world, to shut my mouth. She said, ‘Mother, either shut your mouth and stay in the choir, just sing, or leave!’ I’ve never been so humiliated in all my life!”

I listened.

Then, she said, "So I need you here right now."

I told Betty it sounded like it had been a tough day. A tough evening. I told her I was sorry. I told her I was sorry and I was tired and I was working on a paper. I said, "I think you probably need to rest and let some time go by. I'll come over sometime next week."

Betty shouted into the phone, "You're the poorest excuse for a preacher I've ever seen!" and slammed down her phone.

When we left that small church she came to the farewell and said she had never been so thankful for a preacher. She said I was what the doctor had ordered for that small church.

Sometimes people love you enough that they let you be human, they let you be you, and sometimes people demand that you be a carbon copy of them.

To be emotionally healthy is to have the ability to love people, enter their world, and yet not become a chameleon who thinks and does whatever they say you should think and say you should do. To love well is to enter another person's world and hold on to yourself.

Finally, to love well means we hang in there with people even when life is messy. Scazzero talks about how when we love in the Jesus way we are willing to hang between our world and the world of the others around us. Even when we don't agree with them or understand them or like them.

If you read through the gospels you will notice something interesting: the most persistent critics Jesus has are the Pharisees, members of that movement of middle-class laymen who were passionate about loving God and reforming the nation, and yet Jesus keeps showing up in conversations with the Pharisees. The Pharisees are always grumbling, griping about Jesus, asking him tricky questions, and yet Jesus keeps looking for them. He stays in the conversation. He keeps the conversation going.

I think this is one of the opportunities you have at Ogden Dunes: hang with one another even when life is messy and we disagree with one another.

Here is a question for you to work with: do people have to agree with you if you are to love them.

A friend in Bloomington was an amazing Christian. She was honest, transparent, open about her struggles in life, and sometimes a challenge...she could get a little cranky.

We agreed on most things, and disagreed on others. She was far more liberal or progressive than I was, but I knew how deeply she loved Jesus and how diligent she was about loving others as she had been loved by the Galilean.

She sent me an email one day asking about one of my weekly email devotionals. She asked me if my email about marriage included long-term, monogamous, gay partnerships. She asked me if there was a vision of family in that congregation that was wide enough to include those persons. I said, "Yes." I said my language had not made that clear.

Now, I know we all may think differently on that particular issue here. I'm not trying to persuade you one way or the other.

The point of the story is about God's call to love one another even when life is messy, in our lives or in the church, whether we agree or disagree with one another.

Does not agreeing about something erase the command of Jesus that we love one another as we have been loved?

Do people have to agree with us for us to love them, accept them, include them?

I thanked my friend for loving me when we agree with one another, and when we disagree. She sent back a note and said, "You think we'll disagree?" She added a smiley face after her question. Because she and I both knew we had disagreed about a lot...and would disagree again.

People will disagree not only about this issue but other things.

Will we love one another well enough to hang in there with one another even when loving gets messy? Will we be able to hang onto ourselves while entering the world of the person in front of us?

To love well is to hang in there between two different worlds. It is to "hang in there" between two different worlds.

Donatello teaches Giovanni.

Giovanni works with Michelangelo.

And you can see Donatello in the work of the younger artist.

We learn by watching someone who does it right, don't we?

When it comes to loving have you taken a look at Jesus, lately?