

Embracing Emotion In Christian Spirituality

If you haven't been here the last two weeks, we've been talking about God's vision for our lives—a vision for our wholeness. The wholeness God has planned for us includes what we might label the “spiritual” dimension of life, but it encompasses much more. This wholeness extends to our body, our mind, our emotions, and our relationships.

This Fall we intend to press into the emotional and relational aspects of wholeness because we really believe that we cannot be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally and relationally unhealthy; the two are inseparable.¹ This morning I want to talk specifically about embracing emotion in Christian spirituality—my conviction is that *unless we process, understand, and embrace our emotions, our spiritual maturity will be stunted.*

As I begin, I want to ask you a question that I plan revisit through out this message. Here it goes, “*what kind of relationship do you have with your own emotions?*” I suspect some of you have never really considered the fact that each of us has a relationship with our own emotions.

The vocation of “pastor” allows me to spend significant time talking with God and talking with people. And when I say, “talking with people,” I'm also including listening to people's stories, observing their lives, and engaging in shared experiences. What I've observed is that there is no “one-size-fits-all” relationship with our emotions; the way you process, understand, and embrace your emotion is a product of your physiology, the family you were raised in, the culture around you, and what you think about God.

Allow me to briefly **illustrate**. Can we all agree that the family we were raised in had a profound influence on the way we process emotion? Have you ever been in Superstore and come across a small child having a melt-down in front of their parents? Some cry, some yell, some stamp their feet, some hit, bite, hold their breath, or run away. When my son was young and he wanted something that we weren't going to give him, he would lay down face first (spread eagle) on the floor, and then look up at us to see if we would bend.

How a parent responds is directly related to their relationship with their own emotions. One mother recounts the following story. Her own mother was over one afternoon and happened to overhear her preschool grandchild make the following declaration: “*I am so frustrated!*” Upon hearing these words, the grandmother turned to her daughter and said, “*What are you teaching your children? Children don't have those emotions!*”

Many of us were raised in a similar environment—our parents taught, through word and deed, to dismiss our emotions. When we skinned our knee they told us that it didn't hurt and there was nothing to cry about; when we were angry, they told us there was no reason to be angry. If you grew up in this kind of a home, you likely have a dismissive relationship with your own emotions.

Other families have more of a disapproving style. We were taught that negative emotions are a waste of time, reveal bad character, and need to be controlled. Or, that emotional expression is for weak people—you may feel, but don't let anyone know.

¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 17.

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Still other families have more of an “anything goes” approach when it comes to emotions. The thought is that every expression of your emotions is acceptable regardless of the form of behaviour—screaming, hitting, holding your breath, running off, emotional manipulation, etc.

Think with me for a moment about the role that culture can play. Think about the sweeping generalizations we make about certain cultures and their relationship to emotion:

- the English prize “keeping stiff upper lip”—dismiss your emotions and stay in control
- Italians are painted as passionate people, feeling everything deeply
- Irish people like to be angry, while Canadians are nice, and, apologetic, so much so that they will never tell you how they really feel so as not to offend anyone
- and in certain Asian cultures, people say “yes” when they mean “no”—they do not want to cause offence, conflict, or shame.

So let me ask again, “*what kind of relationship do you have with your own emotions, or, the emotions of others?*”

I want to get to the scriptures—I also want to share some of my own story—but before I do, I need to take a few more minutes to untangle the mess that many have fallen into when it comes to the place of emotion in Christian spirituality. First, let me offer a brief history.

² R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions Of The Heart*, 24.

³ Bill Bright, *The Four Spiritual Laws*.

One of the subtle myths of the evangelical church, one that stretches back to the Protestant Reformation, is that if we only knew more about God, that knowledge would transform us. If we could just ‘understand’ the truths of Scripture, our lives would be drawn towards God’s will.² The implication was that if we are to move godward, we will need to think our way there.

Somewhere along the way, the mind was given priority over the heart, intellect was given priority over emotion—as though God cares about what we think, but what we feel is less important. Let me take this a step further and introduce you to an evangelical analogy from the recent past that many of you will be familiar with.

“Do not depend upon feelings. Tied as they are to your ever-changing circumstances, feelings are unreliable in evaluating your relationship with God. The unchanging promises of God's Word, not your feelings, are your authority. The Christian is to live by faith, trusting in the trustworthiness of God Himself and His Word. A train is a good illustration of the relationship between fact, faith and feeling. Let us call the train engine "fact" -- the fact of God's promises found in His Word. The fuel car we will call "faith" -- your trust in God and His Word. The caboose we will call “feelings... The train will run with or without the caboose.”³

This kind of teaching pointed to scriptures such as Romans 12:2, which says, “*Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you*

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think. [The NIV says that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our mind.]

Here's where the former analogy went off the rails—to make our feelings/emotion analogous to a caboose suggests that emotion is incidental to our lives and Christian spirituality—nothing could be further from the truth! It was Jesus Himself who said, “*These people honour [God] with their lips—they know all the right things to say—but their hearts are far from [God].*”⁴ We can't have a relationship with propositional truth. God is not a theorem; He is a person.

This morning I want invite you to rethink your relationship to your own emotions and the emotions of others. My conviction is that unless we process, understand, and embrace emotions, our spiritual maturity will be stunted. In the time remaining I want to offer three reasons why Christian spirituality wilts when we reject, repress, or neglect emotion.

1. First, emotion is central to knowing God and self.

Those who describe God as being a “Thinker,” need to remember that God is a “Feeler” too—God is the source of all emotion. Do you remember God's emotional reaction after He has finished creating the world? Genesis 1:31 says, “*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*” In other words, God experienced pleasure, He knew joy and delight when He surveyed all that He had made—**God felt**.

⁴ Matthew 15:8.

⁵ Luke 10:21.

By the time we get to Noah, with humanity actively turned away from God and hurting one another, we see another window into God's heart. Genesis 6:6 says, “*The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.*” **God felt**. Let me offer a paraphrase of Exodus 20:4-5; in it God speaks one of the Ten Commandments: “Don't bow don't to idols or false gods, for I am Yours and you are mine...I am jealous for you.” **God felt**.

In Zephaniah 3:17 we read, “*The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.*” **God feels**. John 3:16 says, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” **God feels**.

In Mark 3:5 we catch a glimpse of Jesus' heart as He rubbed up against people who had great theology but lived lousy lives. Mark writes, “*He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.*” **Jesus felt**. One time, after Jesus' disciples came back from a ministry trip and told what they experienced, we read “*Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit*”.⁵ **Jesus felt**.

Hebrews 4:15 reminds us that Jesus is not out of touch with our reality, because He took on our flesh and blood, He knows what it's like to be human—He can empathize with our pain, sorrow, and need. **Jesus feels**.

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God is the source of all emotion, and, we are made in His image. Our capacity to feel love, joy, sadness, and even anger is an essential part of what it means to be like Him. Walling ourselves off from emotion is like choosing to live in black and white instead of colour.

The reason we wall ourselves off from emotion is simple—we are afraid. We are afraid to feel what we do not understand, or cannot control. Are you afraid to feel foolish or angry? Are you afraid to feel rejection, sadness, grief, conflict? We may want to wall ourselves off from certain emotions, but here's the thing, we cannot be dead to some emotions and fully alive to others—it doesn't work that way. The one who walls herself off from pain cannot feel the depth and breadth of love.

There are some things that you are going to miss out on unless you experience them with your heart—there is a power to words, but there is a power deeper than words. Consider a baby. Long before a baby understands a single word that is spoken to him, he experiences love in a smile, when he is held, or kissed.

Nothing is as foundational to the Christian life as knowing and feeling that we are loved by God—nothing. In Romans 5:5 the apostle Paul tells us that “*God’s love has been poured into our heart through the Holy Spirit*”. In Romans 8:15 we are told that “*the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*” In Ephesians 3 Paul prays that we would live in the knowledge and power of God’s love—a love that is wider, longer, higher, and deeper than any other love.

⁶ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 73.

When we reject, repress, or neglect emotion we become disconnected from God, self, and others. I've become convinced over time that the reason many Christians become prayerless has nothing to do with busyness and everything to do with handling their emotions poorly. When is the last time you have prayed any of the following:

- *Father, I am lost, confused--I'm ready to quit on you and on life*
- *Father, I am caught in sin and I can't stop--I'm not sure I want to stop.*
- *Father, I am angry at you for not giving me what I want.*

This is “real” prayer--bringing our real emotion, thoughts, and issues into conversation with God. We “perform” in prayer whenever we leave out what's “real.”

We say to ourselves things like, “*I can't be angry with God, He's done so much for me, expressing anger would be ungrateful and selfish.*” And so we ignore our anger, pushing it off to the side, so that we can pray nice prayers, thankful prayers—prayers we neither mean, nor feel. After awhile, we stop praying altogether because we have eliminated the possibility of saying anything “real.”⁶

Dan Allender and Tremper Longman write, “Ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality... Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice... However, we often turn a deaf ear—through emotional denial, distortion, or disengagement. We strain out anything disturbing in order to gain tenuous control of our inner world... In neglecting our intense

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emotions, we are false to ourselves and lose a wonderful opportunity to know God.”⁷

Emotion is central to knowing God and self, but second,

2. Emotion is a critical component to Christian discernment.

Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, lists the 8 main categories of emotions:

- anger (fury, hostility, irritability, annoyance)
- sadness (grief, self-pity, despair, dejection, loneliness)
- fear (anxiety, edginess, nervousness, fright, terror, apprehension)
- enjoyment (joy, relief, contentment, delight, thrill, euphoria, ecstasy)
- love (acceptance, trust, devotion, adoration)
- surprise (shock, amazement, wonder)
- disgust (contempt, scorn, aversion, distaste, revulsion)
- shame (guilt, remorse, humiliation, embarrassment, chagrin)⁸

Instead of viewing our emotions as an unwelcome interruption in an otherwise orderly life, we need to consider the very real possibility that God can and does speak to us through the ebb and flow of our emotions. I grew to appreciate this truth under the guidance of my spiritual director.

Let me encourage you to turn in your bibles to Psalm 139:23-24. David prays, “*Search me, God, and know my **heart**; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*”

Morris has helped me to see that my fear is often an indicator that I am trying to control something (a situation, a relationship), or, my fear is a sign that I think God is absent or uncaring. I learned to pay attention to my anxious thoughts, through God frequently reveals what I value, what I’m grasping, and where I need to invite His presence, power, and plans. Discernment isn’t just about decision-making, it’s about understanding where God is at work in your life.

Let’s think together for a moment about two specific emotions: anger and joy.

How does processing our anger aid in Christian discernment? Well, our anger can tell something important about what we value and what we expect—we feel anger when someone stands in the way of something important to us. As we process our anger with God and others, we might come to see that we are demanding something that is twisting our heart—something that God wants to release us from. Or, alternatively, we may process our anger with God and others only to discover that our anger mirrors God’s own—is not anger the appropriate response to injustice, violence, and oppression? Emotion can compel us to act in keeping with what God values.

⁷ Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul*, 24-25.

⁸ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, as quoted by Peter Scazzero, 69.

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How about joy? Joy is the appropriate response to beauty, to goodness, blessing, or to an expression of love, freely given. In joy, God speaks to us about who He is, what He has for us, and of the world as it will one day be. Every experience of joy is a whisper that points back to Him—He is the source of all goodness, and His promise is to eventually restore all things to His good, original purpose.

God can speak to our minds, but He also speaks to us through the ebb and flow of our emotions—the one who is alert can hear His voice and know His guidance.

To recap, (a) emotion is central to knowing God and self; (b) emotion is a critical component to Christian discernment, and (c) it is essential to relationship with others.

3. Third, emotion is essential to relationship with others.

Peter Scazzerro writes, “To the degree that we are unable to express our emotions, we remain impaired in our ability to love God, others, and ourselves well.”⁹

illus: I grew up in a family largely made up of men—my dad, my two brothers, and my mom. When Naomi and I were first married, both she and I had a rude awakening. How can I say this sensitively? I was not skilled in emotional complexity or expression. In the early months of our marriage, when Naomi would begin to cry, I would react in one of two ways: (a) disengage out of fear of her emotion, or,

(b) try to fix whatever was causing the emotion in order to make it stop—neither strategy was very helpful.

We quickly discovered that when it came to decision-making, I would lead with the head and Naomi would lead with the heart. I can remember one argument we had very clearly; we were trying to make a decision about something and I had offered 3 or 4 logical, compelling, reasons to go in a particular direction. Naomi responded saying, “*But Mark I really feel like that is the wrong thing to do, we need to go in this direction.*”

Do you know what I said to her? “*Naomi, your feelings can’t count as a reason—if you can’t explain “why” then we need to go this way.*” My poor wife—I’ve since learned that her “feelings” are often more in tune with God than my “thoughts.”

But there’s more to the story than what I’ve told thus far. Before I ever met my wife, in a close friendship, I experienced the deep pain of rejection. I felt unlovely and unworthy, exposed and insecure—I was overwhelmed by these emotions and so I did what came naturally: I buried those emotions so deep that I wouldn’t have to look at them, feel them, or be affected by them.

I told myself that I would never let anyone hurt me like that again. And I didn’t. I walled myself off from emotion, keeping it at arm’s length—not knowing that my self-protective strategies were keeping me from the things I truly longed for: love, peace, acceptance, wholeness. How does one build a deep marriage and self-protect at

⁹ Scazzerro, 26.

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the same time? How does one wall off emotion and grow in intimacy at the same time? Quite simply, one doesn't.

I am slowly growing in my relationship with emotions and it's opening up a world of possibility in my relationship with my wife, my friends, and my God.

Conclusion:

As I conclude this morning, I want to ask one final time, "*what kind of relationship do you have with your own emotions, or, the emotions of others?*" I suppose the only other question to ask is, "*do you want a different relationship?*"

There is a path that leads to wholeness, but it's one that require us to process, understand, and embracing emotion. You cannot be whole on your own—our wholeness is wrapped up in relationship with God and others.

As I've been saying the last few weeks, coming to church on Sundays to listen to my weekly monologue isn't going to be enough for most of us to deal with emotional brokenness. We want to let you know about a few opportunities that we are providing to help us journey towards wholeness.

At the end of October, we will be starting a six week program from Living Waters that is called Journey. Journey is an introduction to the blocks in our relationship with God, self, and others. It's designed to help us understand the issues in our lives and how they impact us, our friends, and families. Journey includes worship, large group teaching, and small group sharing to help us connect with Jesus as

we walk towards health and wholeness. Journey will run for 6 weeks, beginning on Sunday, Oct 19th. There is more information in the bulletin and our website; you can sign up online today.

Also, on October 24th, we pleased to bring in Kristine Rea—a Christian Clinical Counsellor—who has done a lot of work with married couples and families. Kristine will be leading a seminar on developing emotional intelligence in your marriage.

If you've ever felt like you've been hit with a tidal wave of emotion in your marriage, and don't know what to do with it, then you'll want to attend Kristine's seminar. If you've ever experienced emotional tension in your marriage, a warning bell goes off in you, and something shuts down on the inside, then you're going to want to come to Kristine's seminar.

If you want to have a different relationship with emotion—yours and others—then you're going to need to take step. It's worth the risk—real life is waiting.

Pray