

MASTERED BY FEELINGS¹

We continue today with our sermon series, "The Healing of the Self." This week, I'd like to explore emotion or feelings. I want to say quickly and clearly that we are in the presence of true mystery with this subject. My sincere belief is that no thinker or discipline has the definitive word on human emotion. Thinkers differ on what emotion is, whether it brings good or ill, what we can do about emotion, or even if we fully know what we're feeling. Emotion is a mystery and not a puzzle. The Rubik's cube is a puzzle. Clever people can solve a puzzle. A mystery is something like life or a person or love. We can only explore a mystery. And that's what I propose to do today.

"Emotion," as the word suggests, is something that moves us. Feelings arise in us pretty much on their own and they can be powerful motivators. Bereavement brings tears and a sense of emptiness. Love, similarly, can motivate a parent to remain attentive to a child's needs and happiness for 25 years or maybe a lifetime. Feelings of rage can motivate us to screaming at other drivers and speeding off dangerously.

Some feelings motivate sinfulness. In fact, most sin is feeling-driven. I'm thinking of greed, anger, lust, contempt, and so on.

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Observing that emotions drive much sin is not to condemn feeling. Emotions give a deep richness and intelligence to our lives. Bereavement is a fine example. Grief is certainly not a pleasant feeling. But grief does the deep unseen work of rebuilding our lives after we suffer a major loss—say the death of a spouse. No one ought to be in too big a hurry to be done grieving. Or, as someone helpfully observed, “the only way out of grief is through grief.”

Emotions have the additional helpful function of enabling other people to appreciate and connect with us. When others see in us how we’re feeling they are seeing our true selves. If we have tears when we’re sad and are exuberant when we’re happy, the people around us feel in touch with us. People who walk around expressionless or with muted emotions are mysterious to us. We say to our friends, “I just can’t feel close to that guy because I don’t know what’s going on with him.” All of this is because our emotions are a good window into our true selves.

Because emotion is a mystery, whole cultures can have differing approaches to emotion. We have stereotypes of different ethnic groups being excitable or passionate or emotionally suppressed. In American culture today most advertising appeals to feeling in order to make sales. Buy this

car, wear these jeans, drink this soft drink and feel young stylish, or imposing.

Actually, one good way to find what life would look like driven by pure emotionality is to ponder the lives of celebrities. Read People Magazine. You're not going to get a lot of ideas on those glossy, photo-filled pages. With the stars you get continual chaos of jealousy, greed, lust, anger, exhilaration, and trips in and out of marriages, diets, rehab and so on.

So, what does our faith teach us about emotion? To begin with our faith isn't simply about opinions about God or moral behavior. Christian faith is about something that has happened. God has moved and entered our world in Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God has dawned. What we are all about is responding to a new condition and a new possibility.

Do you remember when the LaGrange Daily News had the banner headline: "Kia's Coming?" That was a changed condition for this community. And it was exciting! We felt something. Christian faith has the same quality. There really is something to be happy about—God in Jesus Christ has moved to set us free. The prison doors of our lives have been thrown open, we can move out. We have an example of human life divinely lived in Jesus. That's never happened before. And our feelings change.

Secondly, the Bible sees emotion in its full mystery. It lists destructive emotions, as we see in our lessons, and it suggests that we can put these aside. The Bible also speaks of positive emotions—love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. Again, the idea is that these can become established in us.

For me, just working on this sermon has helped me reach a couple of insights about feelings. I'm realizing that I need not be dragged around by my feelings like a child trying to walk an unruly Great Dane. The Bible is quite balanced about this. It's good to know what is stirring within me, to feel my feelings. But I don't have to feed them. With negative emotions feel but don't feed. The Reformer Martin Luther got this principle in his charming way when teaching about lust. Luther said about lusting—"Birds fly over everyone's head. You just don't have to let them build a nest in your hair."

I said a few minutes ago that grief is the engine that does the inner work of putting our lives back together after loss. Having said this, it's also good to simply realize that indulging our grief endlessly is not wholesome or faithful. God does not wish for us to grieve for a lifetime. I heard of one woman whose daughter died. Every year, thereafter, the mother gave herself a birthday present supposedly from her daughter.

We can similarly feed greediness, or anger, or sadness and grow these feelings into monsters that can run our lives.

How can we control our emotions? The truth is we probably don't have much power to control our emotions. I believe that it is possible in our faith to live a life that is different enough that we simply don't have some kinds of troubling feelings so much and wonderful new emotions take their place. All of this happens when you and I have a relationship with God through Christ. Take, for example, the Apostle Paul's vision of walking in the Spirit. Paul talks about walking in the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians. As you and I live life guided by the Spirit, certain affections become established un us. I'm thinking of the fruits of the Spirit, which Paul lists in Galatians—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In fact, as you and I mature in our Christian faith, we can expect to more and more see these feelings becoming part of our character.

Thank goodness we're not at the mercy of our feelings. I was intrigued to learn several weeks ago that hopefulness as a character quality is a particularly Christian virtue. Back in the Roman Empire, the massive expansion of Christian faith with its positive vision of the coming triumph and Kingdom of God, greatly deepened peoples' sense of optimism that life was not

closed and temporary. Hope was a new possibility and was very different from the resignation people had had before in the face of sameness or decline.

More recently, a large research team has determined that American teenagers who have a life of faith do significantly better in every measurable sociological category. They're happier, more productive, and have better friendships.

To have a relationship with God is to become more like him. That includes our emotional lives. To recognize what he has done and is doing to make real changes introduces exciting possibilities to our lives. To change our ideas in the manner we spoke of last week changes our feeling state.

Here's another factor in cultivating love, peace, patience, and hope. When you and I become more engaged reaching out to others in helpfulness and care our mood lifts and our emotional life is transformed. You and I simply can't be totally self-absorbed and a disciple of Christ at the same time. The shift of focus away from ourselves brings with it a shift in emotions.

Using the ideas that I've shared here's an exercise each of us can do to address negative feelings. When you're in a bad mood, when you dislike yourself or angry or depressed, pray. I know, praying is the last thing we want to do with a bad mood. But pray anyway. Invite Jesus into your anger. Into your

depression. Actually, Jesus is very good being our companion when we're in a black mood. Then pray by asking what Christ thinks of all this. What does he say to it? How does he work with it? What does he want us to do with it?

To encounter and abide with God is to be so changed that even our feelings—over which we may feel no control—even our feelings become new.