

Accept the Gift of Your Emotions

Good morning Cornerstone! I am so excited and thankful to actually be in Cornerstone Centre today bringing you the second message in our current series, “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality”. This series is based on Pete Scazzero’s excellent book of the same name, which I highly recommend to you. Last week Pastor Andrew kicked things off with a message reminding us of how important it is to recognize that emotional health is like an iceberg—our outsides are like the ten percent of an iceberg that you can see above the water, but inside, our emotions are part of the ninety percent of the iceberg that is hidden below the water. And that hidden ninety percent can have a profound impact on our whole life. We looked together at the story of the paralytic whom Jesus healed, and we looked at ways our *lack* of emotional health can interfere with our lives – the blame game, holding on to an embittered spirit, and resisting change.

This week, as we continue our journey into Chapter Two, I am going to invite you to “Accept the Gift of your Emotions”. This morning we will look at three reasons why we should “Accept the gift of our emotions”, then look at a few practical steps we can take to get there.

I. Emotions are a central part of our distinct makeup

First, emotions are a central part of our distinct makeup. Each of us is a unique individual, comprised of various components that all relate to each other. In many ways, we are very similar. We are all physical, intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional beings. But within each part of us, we are unique—distinct—created by God in a particular way for a particular purpose. Take me, for example:

A. We are physical beings

The first thing you will notice is that I am a physical being. I have a body, with a certain height, breadth, weight, and dare I say, age. We are quite familiar with our bodies, and pretty good at recognizing their limitations. For example, I am the tallest person in our house, which means that in the kitchen, if you need something off the tallest shelf, I am a handy guy to have around. But being tall has its down sides too. When we were first married, my wife Lorraine and I lived in India for a few years. When we first arrived in India, we stayed in a small tribal village for a few days—I’m not sure how long, but it was long enough for me to learn that doorways in their

villages are not all as tall as ours. In fact, there was one house where you would approach the door on a downhill slope or stairway (I can't remember exactly), and somehow it just did not compute for me that my head was not going to clear the door frame on that house. So smack, my forehead made its mark on the door. And again. And again. At about the fifth time, they put a sign on the door, "Be Careful David". In spite of the sign, I think I still hit it one last time before I learnt my lesson. The reason I tell you this story is because it illustrates that it is relatively easy to understand our physical limitations and characteristics. This is the part of the iceberg that lives above the surface for everyone to see.

B. We are intellectual beings

But as humans, we are not only physical, we are also intellectual—we are thinking beings. We learn, we reflect, we analyze, we experiment. Here too we are each unique, with brains that are wired in different ways. When I first met Lorraine, we were in Bible College. I was 18 years old, my first time living away from home. Parents of 18 year olds going away to college in September, do not panic here, but the truth is I pretty much fell in love with Lorraine the first week at school because she has a smile that can light up an entire building. Five years later we were married. But putting that aside, there is one thing about Lorraine that is vastly unjust—particularly when we were in College. She has a way better memory than I do. Some courses in Bible College are more or less brute force courses that require you to exercise your brain like a muscle. Learning a new language, for example, requires you to learn hundreds of vocabulary words and word patterns that seem arbitrary and even nonsensical. The New Testament was originally written in Greek, so we were required to at least take an introduction to Greek. For me, that meant hours and hours of writing the hard words out again and again and again until they stuck properly in my brain. It felt like the little grey cells in my brain were made of Teflon—nothing ever stuck to them. On the other hand, it seemed to me that Lorraine had grey cells made of Velcro—I felt like she just had to walk through the same room as the textbook and she had everything permanently memorized. I am exaggerating of course—but only a little. The truth is, we are each uniquely gifted when it comes to the intellectual part of our beings. And like our physical selves, we are quite aware of our intellectual selves—

particularly in the modern developed world, where much of our childhood and early adulthood is spent on schooling.

C. We are social beings

We are also social beings. Covid has affected our lives in many many ways, but one of the things it has highlighted is that humans truly are social creatures. We need each other; we were not made to be alone. So when we are forced to isolate ourselves at home, it can be a struggle as we on the one hand are deprived of some of the social interaction we enjoy and depend on, and on the other hand are forced 24 hours a day to interact with families in a way we have never done before. There is good and bad in this situation, but it certainly shines a flashlight on the importance of our social selves. We easily recognize, though, that when it comes to social interactions, we are also all different. For example, we have degrees of introversion and degrees of extraversion. Extroverts can find interacting in large crowds invigorating (or so I have heard) and introverts like me tend to find them completely exhausting. But we all need social interaction—just in different ways.

D. We are spiritual beings

The Bible also tells us that we spiritual beings—something that the culture around us often neglects. Nevertheless we know that we are made to relate to God. We are made for our spirits to connect with his spirit in a deep and, in fact, eternal way. We are made to love and worship God and enjoy fellowship with him.

E. We are emotional beings

There are many other things that make us who we are. For example, we each have a will—the ability to choose, and to stick to that choice or to change our minds. We have experiences that inform who we are and how we behave. We have preferences—things we each like or don't like. But the fifth part I want to focus on of what it means to be distinct humans is that **we are emotional beings**, which means we feel with the language of the heart. Though our emotions are much more difficult to identify than the various parts of our body, psychologist Daniel Goleman, in his book "Emotional Intelligence: Why it can Matter more than IQ" writes that emotions fall into eight groups:

1. **anger** (fury, hostility)
2. **sadness** (grief, self-pity, despair)

3. **fear** (anxiety, edginess, nervousness)
4. **enjoyment** (joy, relief, contentment, delight, thrill)
5. **love** (acceptance, trust)
6. **surprise** (shock, amazement)
7. **disgust** (contempt, scorn, aversion)
8. **shame** (guilt, remorse, humiliation, embarrassment)

These should all sound pretty familiar to us. They are our heart trying to tell us something. And what it says is unique to each of us. Like everything else about us, our emotional life is both common among all people and particular to us. A few years ago I was in a job that required me to treat people like line items on a budget. Revenues were not meeting expectations, so costs had to be cut—year after year after year. And I was the one laying off my friends, colleagues with whom I had worked for years. That might be fine for some people, but my heart is designed by God to cherish and care for people, one by one. My emotions were revolting at working in a job that was slowly chipping away at something that was core to my emotional health. On the other hand, I find great joy in being near the ocean—I grew up near the ocean and spent most of my happiest vacations near the ocean. For whatever reason, I find it calming and relaxing and peaceful. Toronto is a long way from the ocean, but I found that a lakefront beach does almost as well, so sometimes at lunch I would drive down to the lake and go for a quick walk to try to relax and calm myself down. In the end, I listened to what my emotions were trying to tell me found a job that was better suited for who I am, and I think my whole family was the better for it. Our emotions are talking to us. But are we listening?

I am *not* saying we should give our emotions complete freedom to control us. Not at all. In fact, generations of my responsible, properly behaved, English ancestors just rolled over in their graves at the very suggestion that we would allow our emotions any amount of influence. Neither would I say we should allow intellect to be our master, nor our physical appetites. What I *am* saying is that we should give every part of what makes us who we are a voice at the table. If we don't study, we won't learn, and our intellectual health will suffer. If we don't exercise or rest enough or eat properly, our physical body will suffer. If we don't pray and spend time with God, our spiritual lives will suffer. We know this. But far too often we neglect our emotional health. We'll come back to this later, but for now, suffice it to say that we need

to accept the gift of our emotions—they are a central part of the distinct person God has made us to be.

II. Emotions are part of who God is

God himself is an emotional being. The fact that we have emotions is part of what it means to be created in his image. This is the second reason we should accept the gift of our emotions—**Emotions are part of who God is.** Both the Old and New Testaments are full of examples of God’s emotions. Think back to the beginning. God made all of creation, spinning up the universe in all its glorious splendor. Then way out on the edge of some minor galaxy, he created our beautiful planet of deep oceans and soaring mountains and fertile lands and deserts and frozen wastelands and filled it with a vast variety of plants and animals and finally made Adam and Eve to bear his image and to take care of the planet on his behalf. And then what?

“Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!” (Gen 1:31, NLT). In that moment, I think it is safe to describe God as “delighted” or “joyful” and maybe we can even say he was “proud” of what he made. God took great delight in his creation.

Sadly, God’s beautiful creation was marred by the fall, and humanity began to make sinful choices that demonstrated our willful disobedience to God. We became more sinful and broken and people started to hurt and even kill one another. What was God’s response? **So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart. (Gen 6:6, NLT).**

So what did our broken hearted God do? He went to work—for thousands of years ever since then, God has been working to bring about the restoration of his fallen creation. Some 600 years before Jesus was born, God called a prophet named Jeremiah to warn his people once again that if they did not shape up, he would finally punish them by tearing them from their homes in Israel and sending them into exile into Babylon—what we would call Iraq. What emotion does this demonstrate?

**23 “Look! The LORD’s anger bursts out like a storm,
a driving wind that swirls down on the heads of the wicked.**

**24 The fierce anger of the LORD will not diminish
until it has finished all he has planned.
In the days to come
you will understand all this.”** Jer 30:23-24 (NLT)

But anger is not Jeremiah’s final word on God’s feelings toward Israel. In the very next chapter, Jeremiah writes of God’s long-term love for his people, and of his promise that one day in the future they would know joy once again:

**³ Long ago the LORD said to Israel:
“I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love.
With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself.
⁴ I will rebuild you, my virgin Israel.
You will again be happy
and dance merrily with your tambourines.”** Jer 31:3-4 (NLT)

In the New Testament, we have a record of God doing something new in this broken creation. At just the right time, he sent his son Jesus with a great mission: to correct all that had been wrong with the world. But even before Jesus had begun his ministry, before he had done anything to make his father proud or taken a single step to accomplish the mission for which he had been sent, God sent his spirit to affirm him. Matthew records it this way:
“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.’” Matt 3:17 (NLT). Throughout his ministry Jesus demonstrated both sorrow and delight. For example, after the disciples returned from a successful ministry tour through which God had changed many lives, Luke records: **“Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit”** Luke 10:21 (NLT). When his friend Lazarus died and Jesus went to the tomb where he had been buried, John records a very simple but emotionally powerful response: **“Then Jesus wept”** John 11:35 (NLT). Toward the end of his life, knowing that he was going to be rejected and killed, Jesus went aside with his disciples. Here’s Matthew’s record of that event:

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, “Sit here while I go over there to pray.” ³⁷ He took Peter and Zebedee’s two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. ³⁸ He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of

death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Matthew 26:36-38 (NLT).

This is not the record of an unfeeling God, remote and untouched by what goes on in the world. The God we see in the Bible is one who cares—who experiences passionate love, anger, sorrow, joy and pride. And, I would suggest, he has given us a great gift when he created us with that same full range of emotions.

III. Emotions cannot be denied without paying a price

So far we have seen that emotions are an important part of our unique makeup. We have also seen that God demonstrates a whole range of emotions from delight and joy to anger and heartbreak. But I want to return to how we handle our own emotions, and specifically what goes wrong if we don't allow them their rightful place at the table. Emotions can be powerful and difficult to understand or control. We don't always trust them, we can't always even tell what they are or where they come from, and sometimes we blame them for our bad decisions. So we try to bottle them up. We decide that some are “good” like joy and affection, and should be sought after and enjoyed. Others are “bad” like fear and sorrow and should be buried, swept under the carpet if we can. We even choose scriptures to join in our campaign against our feelings.

- Feeling **fearful**? I've got to stop that! John says “**Perfect love expels all fear**” (1 John 4:18, NLT)
- Feeling **sad**? I've got to stop that! Paul says, “**Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!**” (Phil 4:4 NLT).
- Feeling **angry**? A little is OK, but not too much: “**Don't sin by letting anger control you. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry**” Eph 4:26 NLT

So we go to work against our negative emotions by trying to deny them their right to exist, forgetting that they are a gift from God, an integral part of who we are that are trying to teach us how to follow God. And this brings me to my third point, **Emotions cannot be denied without paying a price**. There are two inevitable results to trying to deny our emotions.

The **first** is, we cannot become who God is calling us to be if we deny our emotions. As Peter Scazzero puts it, “When we deny our pain, losses, and feelings year after year, we become less

and less human. We transform slowly into empty shells with smiley faces painted on them.”¹ Let me repeat that last sentence. “We transform slowly into empty shells with smiley faces painted on them.” This is the lesson I learnt in my last job. Had I continued in that job, and successfully been able to convince my heart that everything was OK, I would have been a little less of the person God is calling me to be on the inside—even if I painted a smile on my face every day when I went to work, or every week when I went to church.

The **second** result of trying to suppress our emotions is that they will inevitable leak out all over the place in ways that will embarrass us, hurt us, and hurt those who are closest to us. Have you ever had one of those conversation or interactions with someone and something just bursts out of them? You walk away kind of shaking your head and saying “what was that all about”? Odds are that was the result of them trying without success to bottle up their emotions. If I have learnt anything in the last five years or so, it is that trying to deny my emotions is a recipe for disaster—they are too powerful to be contained. And I will regret it when they leak out.

We have seen that emotions are in integral part of who we are, that God himself in whose image we are created, demonstrates the full range of emotions, and we have seen that we cannot deny our emotions without paying a price. So, what can we do to take a step towards “Accepting the gift of our emotions”? I have three pretty simple suggestions:

- 1. Give yourself space and permission to feel.**

The first is, “Give yourself space and permission to feel”. This is a bit introspective, which is going to make some of us cheer, and others groan. But we need to give ourselves space to fully feel our emotions. If you already have regular quiet times in your life, take a bit of that time to reflect on your feelings. If you don’t, consider taking time out on a regular basis in peace and quiet to listen to your heart. If you are feeling sad, don’t deny it. Don’t tell yourself that a Christian should be full of joy so you can’t be sad. Remember that Jesus wept out of sadness. If you are mad, don’t deny it. Try to figure out what it is that you want. Seriously—we need to

¹ Scazzero, Peter. Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (p. 44). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

invest in our emotional health as much as the rest of our lives. Perhaps try reading through the list of eight types of emotions and ask yourself which among them you are feeling and why. Or maybe journal what you feel—it's a great way to force ourselves to slow down and listen. Whatever it might look like for you, give yourself space and permission to feel.

2. Don't go through life alone.

Second, don't go through life alone. Take a bold step and talk to trusted people about how you actually feel. I have to pause a bit here to give my entire family the opportunity to simultaneously laugh at the notion of me telling someone how I actually feel. The irony of me making this suggestion is not lost on me—I am a modern man of English heritage, a full time emotion bottler who has spent the last twenty years of his professional life becoming an expert at talking to computers. OK. You can stop laughing now. Seriously. But I mean it. It is 100% impossible for us to become the beautiful, healthy, joy filled people that God has created us to be if we do not open up our hearts to people we trust. If you belong to a small group, are you sharing openly about how you feel, or are you hiding it? If you aren't in a small group, would you consider joining one?

3. Pray.

Finally, pray. Talk to God. Open your heart to him. Yell at God if you need to. Cry before God if your heart is full of pain. Apologize to him if you are feeling shame. Rant at him if you are angry. His love knows no bounds. He has been with you through every joy, every hurt, every loss, every mistake, every victory and every defeat. He cannot be surprised, and he will be with you always. My prayer for you, for all of us, is that God will fill our hearts with joy as we continue to follow his leading and learn to Accept the Gift of our Emotions.