

“Feel Your Feelings” based on John 12:23-33 and select verses

Delivered by Dr. Lucas Stern on March 17, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

For those of you waiting for the organ to start, despite my attire of choir robes, I am not up here to sing right now. This may be disappointing to some of you, and perhaps a relief to others. Nevertheless, whatever your feelings, I encourage you to become more intentionally aware of them, to feel them fully, without judgement, without shame – running towards them as an opportunity to learn rather than run from them out of fear.

Often times, this pulpit is associated with answers. The one standing in this spot expected to provide them with wisdom, patience, confidence, and compassion. Questions that not only can defy the logic we can use as a tool by which to process the world, but even some of the fundamental building blocks of our faith: justice, honor, the omnipotence, and omniscience of our God.

What is the meaning of life? How do you know good from evil? Do we have any control over our destiny or alternatively ultimate control through our choices? Which came first, the chicken or the egg? What are dreams? If you try to fail and succeed, which have you done? Why does suffering exist in the world? For those of you who would like answers to these questions, Drew will be back next week.

However, perhaps I can provide a slightly different contribution to the narrative of this season, perhaps I can encourage you to consider more questions. But also, to practice being comfortable with uncertainty. For by wrestling with the right questions, we can gain a wisdom that is not always in the form of the answer we expected.

“Don’t be a baby.” “Suck it up buttercup.” “Quit your whining.” “It’s not a big deal.” “You need to be tougher.” “Stop crying, you’re embarrassing me.” “What would your friends think if they saw you crying over this?”

These are phrases that many of us heard growing up from coaches, parents, even friends. Phrases that were intended to instill in us a sense of emotional “strength.” Or what you might describe as the ability to complete a specific task, unhindered by your emotions. This skill admittedly is invaluable to have for most people some of the time, and some people to have most of the time.

I do not want, for example, the firefighter working to put a fire out at my house worried in that moment about whether they passed their certification exam. I don’t want my quarterback from my favorite football team after the snap with half their attention on whether or not their sister will get back together with her ex.

However, the message carried to many of us in these phrases is that emotions are a distraction, a weakness even, and we should train ourselves to ignore or suppress them, not only during times of crisis, but any time they are inconvenient or produce discomfort, not only for ourselves but in many cases for those around us.

Yesterday I ran a five-kilometer Spartan Sprint in Atlanta. Thank you for not laughing. For those of you unfamiliar with the race it entails a run/jog/walk through often rough and muddy terrain. Placed at various intervals along the track are obstacles you must overcome some are rather simple such as the sandbag carry where you carry a 40lb sandbag through twist and turns along

the trail. Others are more exciting such as jumping over a burning fire or throwing a spear at a target 25 feet away.

If you fail to complete any of these obstacles, the penalty to keep your official time valid is either an extended penalty lap, or if there isn't one, you can choose as an alternative, 30 burpees. If you don't know what a burpee is, it is going from a standing position to a prone position lying flat on the ground. Most people choose to throw themselves down and do a push up to pop back up. Luckily, I didn't have to do any burpees. There were plenty of penalty laps for the obstacles I couldn't complete.

I have joked with my family that participating in these races is my preplanned mid-life crisis. But thankfully despite my weight, no crisis to this point has occurred. The thing to understand when you sign up for something like this, is that you are signing up for discomfort. If you choose to train for the race, it is uncomfortable. If you choose to run the race without training, it is, well, very uncomfortable. The choice you have really is how you choose to spread out your discomfort.

This discomfort, however, if done in small doses over a long period of time, makes your body stronger. Each morning you wake up, you are better equipped to handle physical challenges when they arise. You are more prepared. You are more comfortable with discomfort itself. And when race day comes you can conquer this challenge with excitement rather than fear if you've prepared well.

Alternatively, if each time you begin training, you stop due to discomfort, your body does not grow in the same way. You still train, but now your training is to yield to discomfort. You may feel discouraged at first but continue this habit and that feeling will soon subside. You will become comfortable avoiding discomfort.

When race day comes, your mind is now expertly trained to avoid the approaching discomfort. Whether you do or not, you will be tempted to cancel the race. If peer pressure or the fear of loss on your investment compel you to continue, your risk of injury increases in the face of both mental and physical challenges that you are untrained to overcome – untrained to continue to persist, when the discomfort becomes tangible.

Today I want to encourage you to embrace discomfort, accepting it as not only inevitable, but invaluable as both an instructor and a trainer. Embrace discomfort early and often and let it help you grow. Dare to feel your feelings.

Going back to our discussion from earlier, we can now make a critical distinction between two concepts, emotional regulation and emotional suppression. The former allows us to notice, process, engage with and respond intentionally and consciously to the feeling that arise within us considering carefully the consequences of multiple response options.

The latter is a defense mechanism designed to shield us from experiencing the discomfort of negative emotions through the process of intentionally excluding negative thoughts and painful experiences from our consciousness. This strategy, if implemented over long periods, can become a default, subconscious reaction to our feelings, leading to emotional numbness.

So now, to the first question that I promised you, what inspires us to choose one path over the other? We might choose to dismiss our feelings if they are perceived by ourselves or others we

trust as dangerous, selfish, or even inconvenient. Many of us are victims to trauma that have caused us to experience emotion so extreme we were simply overwhelmed and unable to process what had happened or its effects on us.

However, we can often forget that emotions are not our enemy. For every emotion, you feel there exists some rational reason for its occurrence. Failing to understand this we pass judgement over the feeling itself rather than our response, making the assumption that the path from a negative feeling to a negative action is simply unavoidable and that the action must be cut off at the source – our emotion, through repression.

As children we can be trained to embrace our emotions, learning to articulate, appropriately communicate, and identify the voice within ourselves as it sends us signals. This is how we practice the art of regulation through experiencing the tension, the discomfort, of unpleasant feelings or emotions.

Daniel Tiger demonstrates several aspects of emotional regulation through emphasizing the importance of increasing your emotional vocabulary with songs like, “Use your words and say how you feel,” and “When you feel so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count four.” Others emphasize using emotional intelligence to build and maintain healthy relationships with others using songs like, “Saying sorry is the first step” or identifying feelings within yourself that appear to be on the surface illogical, for example, “Sometimes you feel two feelings at the same time and that’s okay.”

In the same way discomfort can train us to grow as we train for a race. Discomfort can train us to grow in both self-awareness and mental resilience. Alternatively, if we are taught to squelch emotions, developing a pattern of running from the discomfort we are robbed of a fertile training ground, and left more vulnerable, not less, with only this single strategy when faced with the more extreme challenges, trials and circumstances of life.

In the 2015 Disney Pixar movie, “Inside Out,” emotions are personified as beings living within the control center of a human brain. In this portrayal, the protagonist Riley at one point in the movie became completely cold when some of her emotions left the control center of her brain eventually leading to a complete (but temporary) state of emotional numbness. It was only through the emotion of sadness that the controls were unfrozen, and harmony restored.

Learn to be patient with others and remember that none of us have reached the destination. Be patient in conversations with your children when the first thing out of their mouths to describe their outburst makes you angry, they may be fishing to identify the source of their emotion and may miss it completely on the first try. Don’t close your ears or heart to them as they seek to understand their emotions.

Be careful to practice empathy when someone trusts you enough to come to you for help. Lacking experience in the vast array of emotions felt by ourselves we can lose sensitively to these subtleties in others, finding ourselves not only disabled in fully understanding the source of these emotions in others but even encouraging the limited spectrum in brothers and sisters for simply our own comfort.

“You should calm down.” “Stop being crazy.” “I’m not changing.” “Your just wrong.” “I don’t care how you feel.” “Your feelings are irrational.” “It’s your fault I’m feeling this way.”

Someone with emotional intelligence understands that feelings come from our internal perception of events. Others may be responsible for fixing a problem they cause, but it is unfair to expect them to walk on eggshells to regulate our emotions for us, this power is entirely within our control and entirely our responsibility.

“Just pray about it.” “Remember God commands us to forgive.” “I’ll pray for you.” “Quoting scripture.”

Response like this despite their truth can be drained of all empathy if not preceded first by a sincere and compassionate listening ear or at least an acknowledgement of what your brother or sister is going through. If delivered quickly they can seem dismissive as if to say, God has time for you, but I certainly do not. Instead, we must strive to be Christ’s representative in these moments, being honest about our own capacity and constraints but taking the time to acknowledge the situation for what it is. Ultimately, the advice may be good, but we have left them alone on the journey with a statement that they likely already know.

James 1:19, says, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” In Mark 12:30-31 it says, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Brene Brown said it best, we cannot selectively numb. If we choose to block out the negative extreme emotions, the positive extreme emotions quickly follow suit, robbing us not only of the richness of life we were made for, but the subtle prompting of the Holy Spirit designed to push us closer to our greatest life.

For while this positive journey of self-awareness not only attunes our sense to understand and recognize our own emotions but the emotions of others, and the lack thereof can leave us isolated and confused, as we feel the temptation to blame others for what does not appear to make sense on the surface. We all can and should seek to increase our emotional intelligence.

Seek wisdom. Ask and believe. James 5:1 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” Acknowledge your emotions and do not be afraid to feel them.” John 11:33-36 says, “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’”

When circumstances cause an illogical mix of emotions, strive to mimic Jesus courageously. John 12:27 says, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--’ Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

Jesus felt two feelings at the same time. There is a way to feel the feeling without being compelled to act. Statement one: “My soul is troubled.” Statement two, acknowledging how one might be compelled to act on this feeling. Statement three, a decision not to be controlled by our raw emotions. And four, responding intentionally and thoughtfully.

Seek help – for those whose trauma is deeper than most of us can imagine and numbness seeming closer to completion than we might even admit. Do not give up. The cost is too high, through therapy, community, and prayer, dare to feel the discomfort as the God we serve is greater still than our pain.

Wherever you are today, I want to give you permission to feel your feelings, without judgement and ask simply that you extend the same courtesy for your neighbor. Our actions of course must be weighed. Our ability or lack thereof to regulate our emotions is no excuse for our behavior.

However, the feelings themselves must be carefully weighed and evaluated by the feeler and those with whom they share trust to dissect the nuances of our core beliefs, our default thoughts and even our unspoken prejudices. Through this knowledge, we gain the ability to grow, change, evaluate and adapt. We gain the freedom to become our truest selves and to recognize and become a catalyst to remove the barriers that imprison countless souls we will encounter on this Earth.

Lord, thank you for our feelings. Thank you for this time. Thank you for your feelings, for your examples you set for us. Give us courage as we dare to take a step of faith to embrace discomfort, see you more fully, feel you more fully and attune ourselves to the subtleties of the Holy Spirit, our own emotion, and the emotions of others. May you always be there for us to run to you with raw emotions when we need your help and support, as you are our Father, in Jesus's name. Amen.