

September 29: Emotional & Spiritual Intelligence (Romans 12:1-8) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help for Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons. In the past, we’ve followed a lectionary—or a predetermined set of texts that take us through the Old and New Testaments—but this time, we’ll be creating our own path through the scriptures. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. We will identify certain stories, songs, and wisdom from the Bible that can teach us more about these needs, conditions, and experiences, and help us connect with God and with each other. This first month, we’re introducing some foundational themes that will guide us through the rest of the year, so that we can enter into these conversations with a similar mindset, and a common vocabulary. Then we’ll launch into more specific meditations, focused on experiences such as loneliness, family dysfunction, anxiety, addiction, and more. We won’t be able to cover everything, but we hope that what we do share will raise awareness, build relationships, and connect you with resources in our larger community. Before we dig a little deeper, would you pray with me?

God of compassion, you are a safe place for us, and you welcome us with mercy and love. May we trust you to transform us and help us live as you made us to be: fully ourselves, fully awake to life, and in connection with you and others. May we hear your voice of love and invitation and wisdom this morning. Amen.

Has anybody here ever read through an unmoderated online comment thread about a news article or social media post? How many of you came away a better and more enlightened person? Honestly, I think that the times I feel most hopeless about humanity are after wading through the wasteland of unmoderated online discourse. No matter what the initial topic is, the discussion will *always* devolve into a cesspit of personal insults and accusations, clown emojis, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, conspiracy theories, and worse. Even people whose positions I agree with rarely show their best selves in online discourse.

There's a psychological term, the "online disinhibition effect," for what causes this virtual nastiness – in other words, when we shed our identity and become anonymous, the usual constraints on our behavior go, too – instead of thinking before we speak, we simply react and spew forth whatever pops into our mind, based on our emotional reaction to the topic or the comments we just read – we fail to catch and regulate our worst impulses. And because we can't see and usually don't know the people we're interacting with, we're less likely to practice curiosity or empathy or care about how we make them feel. And the result is not good or pleasing.

I've started off my sermon with this depressing prelude because I think that it relates to how our Scripture passage today begins. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul told his listeners to "not conform to the pattern of this world" (Romans 12:2) – and I think that what often happens in unmoderated online discourse – the defensiveness, assumptions, reactivity, dehumanization, and self-centeredness – is a stark illustration of the "pattern of this world". But it's a pattern that doesn't only play out on the internet. Nasty comment threads are an especially clear example of what we all struggle with, where our emotions and impulses and instincts – which we're often not even aware of – shape and control our words and behaviors and reactions in ways that are detrimental to ourselves and our relationships with others.

On the first two Sundays of our Soulcare series, Pastor Meg preached about the way God created us to be – in God's image, good, with the breath of God in our lungs, with souls that were made for vitality, and abundance, and to live life to the fullest. She taught us that we were created to live in deep connection with ourselves and each other and with God, to be integrated and whole, to act in ways that are true to our essential character and divine purpose. We were created as emotional beings who experience joy and happiness, fear and sadness and anger and surprise, and we're meant to feel all the feelings throughout our life. Our emotions are an integral, inescapable part of who we are and how we think and what we do – in fact, 100% of our human experience is filtered through the emotional part of our brain. Our emotions are the first screening mechanism for all of the information we receive through our senses,¹ and they are designed to function in integration with our minds and bodies and spirits, to help us connect and respond to the world and people around us and live life whole-heartedly.

¹ Merry C. Lin, *Rebecoming: Come Out of Hiding to Live as Your God-Given Essential Self* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2024), p.27.

But we live in a broken world. And right from our very beginnings, the brokenness in our world began fracturing us, shaping our patterns of response and hindering our ability to live as our true, whole, essential selves. Often, the very patterns of thinking and behavior we learned in order to protect ourselves become barriers to living fully now, and we continue to react to powerful emotions of fear and shame and anger rooted in past experiences, hurting ourselves and the people we care about and damaging our ability to connect. We lash out and say ugly things when these emotions are triggered, or we clam up and shut down; we neglect our own gifts and well-being and suppress our voice in order to please or placate others, or we dominate and silence others in order to retain control. We achieve good things for a just cause, but we burn ourselves and others out along the way. We blame others for our own mistakes and reactions; or we have hidden addictions or compulsions (or internet comment posts) we are too ashamed to share. We sabotage our relationships with people we love, and we can't seem to stop. We don't live as the person we want to be, even when we're doing things that are good. We are stuck in the broken patterns of this broken world.

But we don't have to stay there. When we turn back to Romans 12:2, we hear that healing and change are possible: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will." When I first spent time with the verse as a teenager, I thought that testing and approving what God's will is would mean figuring out the specifics of what God wanted me to do with my life: where God wanted me to go to college, what major God wanted me to pursue, what person God wanted me to marry, and how precisely God wanted me to make a difference in the world.

But I don't read the verse that way anymore. I think that we test and approve God's will for us not by uncovering a specific preordained blueprint for our lives and following it, but by becoming fully ourselves and living into the person God created us to be, whole and integrated and connected to God and others, reflecting the divine image in our own unique way, no matter what our life situation is – living this kind of life *will* make a difference in the world. In her book *Rebecoming*, clinical psychologist Merry Lin writes that "as we know ourself and live out of our essential self more fully, we can reflect God's glory in the way he has created us to do so, a way no one else can. And *that* is fulfilling the purpose he has for us.

“However,” Dr. Lin continues, “truly fulfilling God’s purposes for our life requires maturity”² – or in the words of Paul, it requires being transformed by the renewing of our mind, by fundamentally changing and reframing the way we perceive and think about ourselves and the world and others. Paul is saying that our brains need to be rewired so they don’t conform to the broken pattern of this world, something that modern neuroscience has confirmed is possible. And one vitally important dimension of this cognitive conversion is the cultivation of emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence is a term that describes how we identify, process, and manage emotions, both our own and others. People who are emotionally intelligent have high self-awareness: they know their strengths and their weaknesses and can identify the emotions that impact them. They’re also aware of the emotions of others, and the impact they have on them. And they use that awareness in a positive way – instead of denying or suppressing or automatically reacting to their feelings, emotionally intelligent people regulate, manage, and even harness them in order to make good decisions, do the right thing, cope with change, build empathy, and connect with others. The gospels are full of examples of how Jesus embodied emotional intelligence: he freely expressed emotions like joy, excitement, sadness, frustration, and anger, but he was not controlled by them. His emotional intelligence helped him connect deeply with a variety of people, from a suspicious Pharisee to a Samaritan woman with an instinctive distrust for Jewish men; from a rejected and despised tax collector to the children who couldn’t stay away: he made them all feel safe enough to ask questions and share freely and be transformed. He refused to be baited and sidetracked by opponents. And he was able to remain calm, non-reactive, and focused as a murderous crowd pelted him with false and ridiculous accusations.

Emotional intelligence has become a bit of a buzzword, both in pop psychology and in the workplace, because people with high emotional intelligence are more productive and make better leaders and team players. There are many, many strategies and resources out there to improve your emotional intelligence so that you can perform better, live better, and enjoy healthier relationships. And that hype and commercialization can have the negative effect of reducing emotional intelligence to a strategy for being successful; a life hack that can be acquired or strengthened by following a series of tips or going to a workshop or training.

² Lin, *Rebecoming*, p.14.

But that's not how Paul talks about it. Emotional intelligence (for maturity), for him, isn't something we do by ourselves to gain a competitive advantage or succeed in life. It's the fruit of an inner transformation, a collaboration between us and God, where we join together in the good work of rewiring our brains and healing our souls so that we might have life to the full and become fully ourselves. The first verse of Romans 12 says this: "I urge you, brothers, and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." That is a powerful way to begin the soul transformation we're hungry for – to be so assured of God's steadfast mercy, compassion, and love for us that we give ourselves over to God, allowing God's spirit to indwell and change us. Paul writes that as we walk in step with God's Spirit, we will produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – a pretty good description of some of the fruits of emotional intelligence. And if you read the rest of Romans 12, you'll see more of the fruits of the renewing of our minds: a beautiful vision of love in action, supportive community, and emotional maturity in the face of opposition and suffering. And that's why I think emotional and spiritual intelligence go hand in hand – they're the integrative work of God's spirit in us. It doesn't make sense to pursue one without the other.

I used the word "pursue", because we're not passive in this process – we're called to respond to God's grace with our own intentional steps forward. We can't change our past, and there's a good part of our present that is beyond our control. But no matter what our circumstances are right now, each of us is given the free choice of how to respond. We can choose to walk forward, with God's help, into fuller emotional and spiritual intelligence, into deeper and healthier connection with ourselves and others and God. And that journey of transformation begins with self-awareness. In verse 3, Paul writes this: "By the grace given to me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."

None of us in this room have arrived at complete emotional and spiritual maturity. We all fall into the broken, reactive patterns of this world, and until we can honestly name and accept our dysfunctional patterns and take ownership of them, we're not going to be able to change. Reframing all of our weaknesses as strengths, or blaming them on other people or circumstances, or spiritualizing them rather than dealing with them, just keeps us trapped. We cannot start a journey of transformation from a pretend place we wish we were in – we can only start from where we truly are right now. We can pursue

a fearless, sober assessment of ourselves in accordance with the faith God has given all of us: the faith that God receives our imperfect, messy, vulnerable self with love and mercy and compassion, as a beautiful and acceptable and holy sacrifice. And as we do the hard work of honest self-awareness, I believe that we need to see and accept ourself with the same love and compassion as God does. That is the soil in which change begins.

And here's a wonderful thing that happens when we courageously do the work of self-awareness and self-acceptance: we uncover not just our weaknesses, but also our deep strengths and gifts; we discover what brings us deep joy. Dr. Merry Lin writes that true self-acceptance leads to "an affectionate view of our own strengths, our unique quiriness, and our potential, and it gives us a genuine desire to use our strengths for a good purpose."³ You see this in Romans 12: right after Paul calls us to think of ourselves with sober judgment, he launches into a short list of the diverse gifts bestowed on each one of us, and encourages us to know and name our own strengths and whole-heartedly live them out in community.

But how do we begin that work of self-awareness? In truth, this entire year is about our soulful journey to emotional and spiritual maturity – and if, after today, you simply feel a longing for your own transformation, if you realize that you have still work to do in the area of emotional intelligence, you've already taken a step – ponder that longing and keep coming. But if you'd like to start now, I encourage you to try a simple practice over the next few weeks.

As elementary as it sounds, learning to identify and name our emotions as we feel them is a profound, building-block skill of emotional intelligence; we can't regulate or moderate emotions we don't notice. And so, I invite each of you to pause a few times during the next few days – maybe set a special alarm – and do your best to identify the emotion you are feeling right then. One tool that's useful for doing this is a feelings wheel: you can pick one up from the worship resources table in the welcome center, or in the fellowship hall. At the center of this wheel are six core emotions, and you first decide which one you feel and then move outwards in the circle to identify secondary emotions. For example, I often feel scared when I get up to preach or speak; and as I move outward from that core emotion, I can qualify it: am I actually feeling fearful, insecure, anxious, rejected, weak, or nervous? If I decide "insecure" describes me best, I can move to the final, outer circle, which lists even more specific emotions: do I feel more inadequate, or inferior?

³ Lin, *Rebecoming*, p.118.

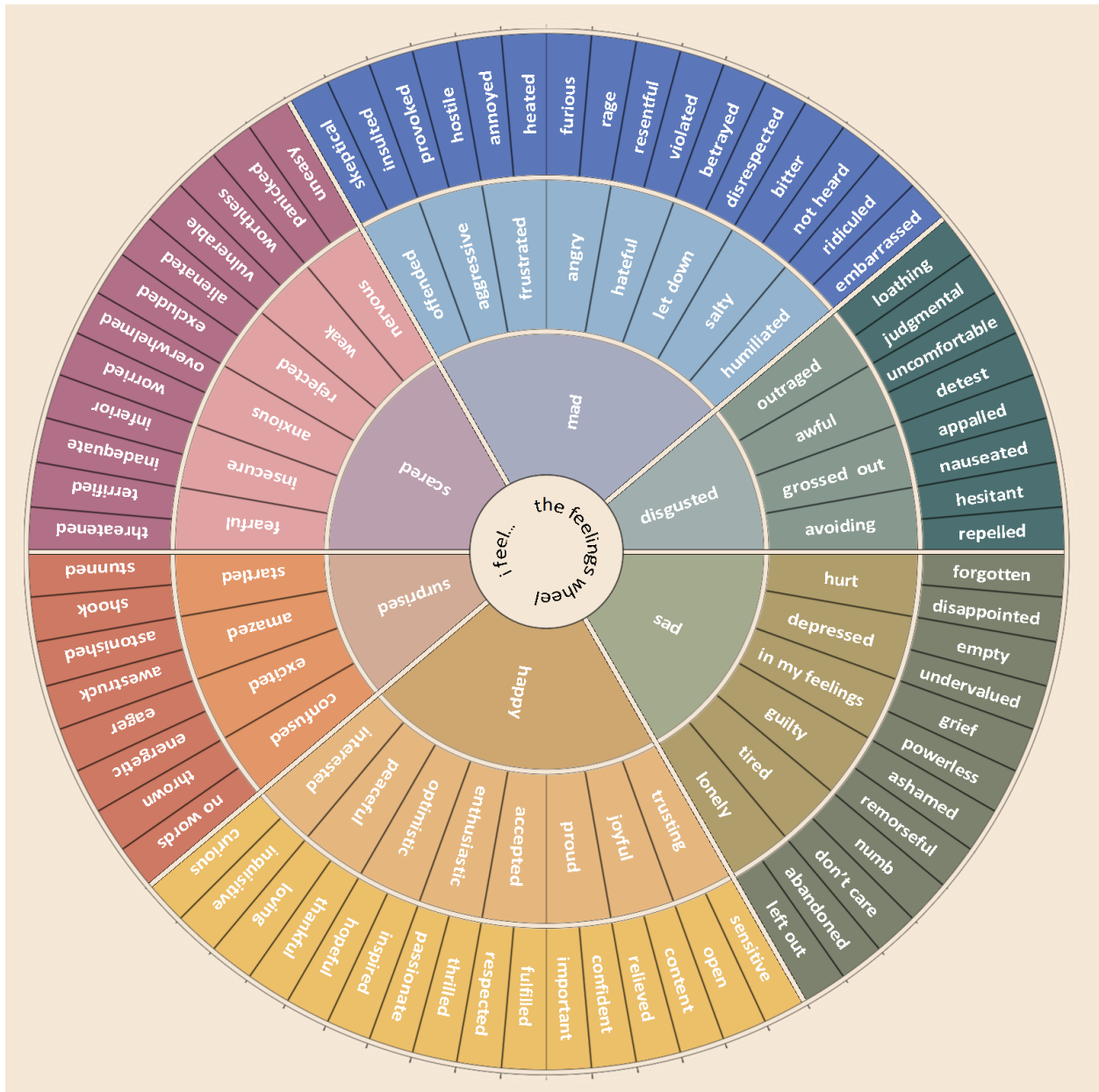
Sometimes I might be able to identify a specific secondary emotion, but not know what the core feeling is. Let's say that I feel embarrassment, which is on the outer circle. If I follow that in to the center, I discover that the core emotion behind that is anger, an emotion I usually bury or ignore. And I realize that perhaps I'm feeling anger more often than I thought.

As you continue to notice and name your emotions, you can also begin to note how you're physically feeling each time, as well as what's going on – the context. Write it down, and after doing it a few days, look for patterns. Is there a particular core emotion you experience again and again? What might be triggering that emotion? How do you react? How might your emotions or the reactions to them be tied to how you physically feel? This exercise is even more impactful if you can share what you're noticing with somebody you trust. If you have kids, it can be a great exercise to do together as a family. During the first year that Luke and I were married, we noticed a pattern, after a lot of miserable evenings – that any problem-solving, work-out-our-differences conversations we had after 8:00 p.m. would go downhill fast. We finally learned to save those emotionally-fraught discussions for the daytime, when our tolerance for strong emotions was much greater!

The important thing when you're doing this is not to label your emotions as “good” or “bad” – simply notice them and name them and take note of how they affect you, and how you respond. Be curious. If you do this exercise and identify an emotion that feels difficult or prompts a strong reaction, I invite you to name it and then practice self-compassion and self-care – that might be as simple as a deep breath and inviting God into that moment, or it might be something more involved. You're taking a step towards accepting and tolerating difficult emotions.

As I wrote the last few paragraphs and imagined preaching them, I noticed that I felt uneasy (I used the feelings wheel to name that), and as I sat with that feeling, I realized that I was worried that learning to identify emotions wasn't a “spiritual” enough practice to close a sermon with. Despite all my fine words about emotional and spiritual intelligence being inseparable (which I do believe), I still fall prey to old patterns of thinking. I have work to do. I'm so glad that I am on this soulcare journey with you. May we grow together into a community where none of us need to pretend to be any better than we are, but where we can break free of dysfunctional patterns of this world and grow and transform together into who God created us to be. Amen.

Feelings Wheel



From Parent Cue: <https://theparentcue.org/resources/feelings-wheel/>