

A news story last Sunday reported that, in his remarks at a fundraiser, the governor of Mississippi said residents of his state were less afraid of Covid-19 because of their belief in eternal life: “When you believe that living on this earth is but a blip on the screen, then you don't have to be so scared of things.” These remarks were made as Mississippi is dealing with a wave of Covid infections and hospitalizations, not to mention Hurricane Ida.

Reading that just 2 weeks before the 20th anniversary of 9-11, I recalled how the attack upon the US on that dreadful September morning was carried out by ‘true believers’ who also considered their lives ‘but a blip on the screen’. The manner of their deaths, according to their interpretation of the Koran, assured a speedy elevation into paradise.

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With both examples, I am not sure how to distinguish between the hope of eternal life and a death wish; the idea being that ‘the sooner life is over, the sooner we’re evacuated into a heavenly realm.’ And frankly, what reason then is there to care about life in this world if the point of our existence is just getting onto the next? I cannot speak to The Koran, but for those of us who are Christian, the practical impact of the idea that life is a temporary ‘blip on the screen’ is that, “death becomes our savior; not Jesus.”

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Friends, this is our first week in a series on the theme “Flourish.” Today, and over the next few weeks, we are going to explore how Jesus invites us into abundant life: beckoning us to lives of wholeness and wellbeing in every dimension of our *present* existence: emotional, spiritual, relational, and so on... Our scripture is John 10:7-10. [Video]

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The first thing to notice are Jesus’ words in v. 10, where he offers a contrast between his ministry over and against ‘the thief’. The thief he says, is one who comes **to steal, to kill, and to destroy**. So ‘the thief’ both takes away life (steals) and deals in death (killing and destroying). But Jesus says, “I came that they – the sheep – may have life and have it *abundantly*.” So Jesus is the opposite of the thief; he is not a death dealer. He is a life giver, a life saver, a life redeemer!

In my study Bible, v. 10 cross references 2 scripture passages to illuminate the meaning of ‘abundantly’. It first references John 3:15, where Jesus says, “whoever believes in him may have *eternal* life.” It also references Psalm 23:5 (and I’ll include v. 6) where the psalmist declares: “You prepare a table before me in the

presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me *all the days of my life* and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord *my whole life long*.”

We moderns often adopt the idea that eternity (John 3:15) is what begins *after* we die. But, Psalm 23 is not describing life *beyond* death, but rather life as full participation in the life God has already given us. By referencing both John 3:15 and Psalm 23:5, my study Bible is trying to convey how abundant life -- what we sometimes call eternal life -- is a life beyond measure and without limit. Indeed, the verb in the phrase Jesus uses, “I came that they may *have* life”, is present tense, to indicate that this gift is right now and is ongoing! And so if Jesus is inviting us into this abundant, limitless, flourishing life, why would we postpone that unless ‘the thief’ has somehow convinced us that ‘death, and not Jesus, is our savior’?

And this is also important! Many of our Christian brothers and sisters, maybe even some of you, tend to identify ‘the thief’ with Satan. But that’s not an idea from this passage! We have read that into the passage. I think it is much more likely, if Jesus is referring to anyone, that he’s referring to the Pharisees who, following the healing of the man born blind in John 9, have confronted Jesus. John 10 is Jesus’ response, because Jesus has healed the man born blind so that he can live a flourishing life. The Pharisees don’t accept this and try to steal away and destroy the beautiful thing Jesus has done! (But even that inference may be a stretch.) I think it is more likely that Jesus is saying that ‘the thief’ is anyone or anything that gets in the way of the flourishing life Jesus comes to invite us to live. In this case, it is the Pharisees who are getting in the way of this...

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And so if we’re going to accept this invitation, this means embracing the flourishing life Jesus came to give us now; a full life of emotional, environmental, physical, mental, and relational wellbeing. Today, I want to focus on emotional health and wholeness as one facet of this flourishing life.

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A few years ago I had the good fortunate to read *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, by Peter Scazzero. The author, a pastor, has now written a number of books and studies focusing on emotionally healthy spirituality, emotionally healthy relationships, emotionally healthy leadership, and emotionally healthy discipleship. Judging by the number of churches implementing these

studies, it seems that the need for emotional health is a real concern.

In this first book, Scazzero writes that in the midst of his own failures as church leader and husband, he had learned a critical lesson: ‘It is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.’* He then writes: ‘To truly love God with *all* our heart, soul, mind, and strength requires that we know not only God but also *our interior – the nature of our own heart, soul, and mind.*’ That makes sense, right? That we have to know our own heart, our own emotions if we are going to grow spiritually!

When I first read that several years ago, I thought about my own experiences in church, both before and after entering ministry, and it rang so true. Churches have not done particularly good job of helping people explore and know their interior landscape! And this emotional immaturity makes it difficult when issues of conflict emerge in the church.

A minister who I mentor called me this week because a member had verbally assailed him in the receiving line after worship on Sunday. His offense was omitting the doxology, because the pianist had abruptly resigned a week earlier and so they had no one to play the doxology! (Being assailed in the receiving line is not an uncommon occurrence for ministers!) In the case of my colleague, the next person in the receiving line was someone who had begun attending the church just 4 weeks earlier and was interested in joining the church. Witnessing that interaction gave that person pause. The impacts of emotional immaturity ripple out and do spiritual damage within and beyond the body of Christ. This is why scripture upon scripture warns against gossip, slander, and spreading half-truths!

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Let me briefly touch upon 6 principles Scazzero recommends for Christians to seek emotional health. First, “look beneath the surface,” which means both 1) developing an awareness of our own feelings and actions, and 2) an awareness of our motivations. Think back to the first thing Adam and Eve did after eating the forbidden fruit. They hid themselves from God. They did not want to face what they’d done and they ended up blaming each other. We often want to hide from ourselves and God, and so stay at a surface level instead of going deeper.

The second principle is to “break the power of the past.” This means looking at our family history and other major influences to see how our experiences have shaped us for better and for worse. If our family history

includes divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual violation, etc., that past is not simply erased when we are adopted into God’s family. This can require some hard work with a therapist, but the good news is that God’s desire is to heal our brokenness so that we can go out and be wounded healers ourselves.

The third principle is to ‘live in brokenness and vulnerability.’ Contemporary church culture has largely bought into the world’s definitions of success, but the Apostle Paul’s growth in Christ parallels his increasing awareness of weakness and brokenness. (Mike Burke addressed this so well in his message on Aug. 16th so listen to that message if missed it, or listen to it again if you heard it!)

The fourth principle is for emotional health is to ‘receive the gift of limits.’ Scazzero writes, “understanding and respecting boundaries and limits is one of the most important character qualities and skills leaders need in order to be long-term lovers of God and others.” Scazzero points out how the devil wanted Jesus to transcend his limits and boundaries during his period of testing in the wilderness.

The fifth principle is to ‘embrace grieving and loss’. I will not say much more about this because it will come up again in this series, but I will say that embracing grieving and loss is the only real pathway to become a compassionate person like our Lord, Christ Jesus.

Which leads directly into the sixth principle: ‘make the incarnation our model of loving well.’ St. Basil, a 4th Century bishop once wrote: “Annunciations are frequent; incarnations are rare.” In other words, “bold declarations of what God is doing or saying are common, but people who follow the humble way of Jesus are difficult to find.” Following the humble way of Jesus is how the earliest followers understood what it meant to be Christian.

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I want to close with an action step and invite you to complete an inventory of your own spiritual and emotional health. There are copies for you to pick up as you exit worship, or if you are online, you can go to this link and print up your own assessment to score: https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ehs_assessment013.pdf

Remember, none of this will be news to God, but I pray it may help you take steps toward emotional and spiritual flourishing. And keep your results on hand as we proceed through this series.