The Way of the Samaritan

[COLOR, CREED, COVID and COMPASSION]

I learned an important truth this past year, one that required some serious adjustment to the way I think, act, judge the motivations of others and even the way I approach the Word of God. And the statement goes like this:

Emotions ***tell the truth*** about what we ***actually believe***.

Such a simple sentence, and I've been unpacking it for months now. If we give this one serious thought, it has the potential to force a radical retooling of our inner lives.

I'm indebted to the work of Ed and Joshua Smith in their seminal book "Effortless Forgiveness" for bringing this principle to my attention.

When I make that statement more personal it takes on even greater power and immediacy. It's no longer an abstract theory – it's both an indictment of the ways I justify myself, and offers hope - a path out of self-righteousness.

This is the way I read it to myself now: "***MY*** emotions tell the world the truth about what I actually believe." Ponder those words for a second. Maybe even try them out, yourself. Do they feel strange on your ears? They did mine!

The first thing about that statement that rankled me was how it dislodged another idea I'd held my entire adult life, and it goes like this: "Emotions cannot be trusted – We need to reason our way to ***real*** truth." That kind of moral rationalism has been the bedrock of my worldview since I've ***had*** a worldview.

Friends, it's a lie.

Don't misunderstand me – I'm absolutely ***not*** saying that our emotions ***always tell us the truth***. We certainly have the capacity to lie to ourselves at any moment. This challenge to our suspicion of our own emotions is simply saying that our emotions are a critical, essential and honest window into our ***hearts***. When I'm trained to be suspicious and judgmental of emotions, anybody's emotions, even mine, I remain suspicious of the heart – anybody's heart.

Maybe you've had this experience: You've shared your heart with someone and they completely misunderstood what you said, what you were ***trying*** to say and remained suspicious of your motivations for saying it. Hey – I've been there and there's real heartache in that. Maybe if you're honest, you might remember when you've done that very thing to others, later to discover you completely misjudged the situation. Maybe it's still a regret hanging at the back of your mind, hindering the potential of further relationship, and you don't know where to start in repairing the damage. You don't know how to ask forgiveness of someone who remains suspicious of you. I've been there too.

Of course, there are plenty of circumstances and people that train us to remain skeptical of what we hear, but even that requires a generous dose of humilty on our part. Being willing to admit to ourselves – and God – that I may not have ***everything*** about this situation figured out is wise. It can keep us from blasting away at others and unwilling to consider any other interpretation of events.

Maybe you've seen a lot of blasting going on in our society recently – on social media; on the airwaves; on the street.

I'm discovering that plenty of people are just as resistant to this new idea as I was. I think the reason is this: discovering that our emotions are telling us the truth about our heart beliefs means we might discover some uncomfortable truths. When we turn a critical eye on our own emotions and ask ourselves what they're telling us, things might not add up correctly. I think we instinctively know that it's a possibility and we want to avoid that.

Quick thought experiment for you: Someone tries to explain how your idea is inferior to theirs – at least that's the way it ***feels*** to you – and you feel your blood beginning to boil. You ***know*** you're right and they're wrong. You say to yourself "They make me ***so mad*** when they do that! Why can't they simply see that I'm right?"

This is such a common scenario that I'm sure you can imagine or remember being in just such a place. Now what can we really learn from this? Our first take at honest assessment might be something like this: "When I know I'm right, it really offends me when someone calls that into question. I feel belittled and attacked. That makes me so mad."

That sounds perfectly reasonable and humble, doesn't it? And on one level it might very well be true. It's also, as counselors might say, a meta truth. It's an intellectual assessment of what you experienced when you experienced those emotions earlier. It's your mind talking back to your emotions.

Ah, but what are the emotions themselves saying? This might be a little more difficult to accept. It might very well be something like this: "I know I'm right, and when you challenge it, you're arrogant, ignorant and stupid. My moral compass is superior to yours and I don't owe you one minute to consider your ridiculous idea."

Sounds a little harsh, doesn't it? And it may very well be what you were really ***feeling*** at the time. And that's the heart of the matter.

Friends, we live in a world full of the kind of self-justification this little example reveals. It poses a real danger to our relationship with others and our relationship to God. We might very well need a real change of heart. So, I'd like to spend a few minutes on one of the parables of Jesus today and look deeper into what it tells us about our hearts when faced with a moral dilemma. It's found in the 10th Chapter of Luke.

In this famous passage, Jesus has sent out the 70 to proclaim the Kingdom of God and they all return with amazing stories of miracles and changed lives. Jesus Himself is so overwhelmed with Joy that He prays loudly as He worships His Father, again proclaiming Himself as uniquely God's Son and God as uniquely His Father.

And what's the very next thing mentioned in Luke chapter 10? A story we're all, hopefully, familiar with. From verse 25:

25 A professor of Mosaic law stood up to cross-examine Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "when it comes to eternal life, what do I have to do?"

26 "What does the Law say?" Jesus replied. "And how do you interpret it?"

27 The professor answered, "'You shall be loving God the Master from the depths of your heart, from the bottom of your soul, expending every ounce of strength in every way you can think of'; and, 'Love the one closest to you as you would yourself.'"

28 "Absolutely correct," Jesus replied. "Do all of this all the time and you'll really be alive – now and forever."

29 So wishing to present himself as someone who lives that way, the law professor followed up with another question. "So, who is my neighbor, then?"

Before we move on, what's up with this lawyer's follow up question? Why bother with asking Jesus to expand on the thought? He could have just let it drop there or argued the point if he felt inclined. But no – He was trying to box in Jesus on something. What was it? Well, consider the previous scene: Jesus has just celebrated the revelation of the Kingdom of God to, as we might say, the unwashed masses. 70 associates of Jesus proclaimed the Gospel to thousands and saw the Spirit of God unleashed in power. Untold numbers of people – common people – responded to the message. And they also saw their diseases healed and evil spirits cast out, and all in the Name of Jesus, the itinerant preacher now standing in a circle of professors and trial lawyers. Jesus is overjoyed that the least educated, the least morally upright, probably even folks who no one would consider 'proper Jews' were now praising the name of God.

These are people who no self-respecting Jew would spend time with. This law professor is just that kind of person – self-righteous, educated, knowledgeable and intelligent.

Jesus responds with one of the most inflammatory parables of his career. And it may not have even been a parable. It might very well be a true account of something that actually happened. He doesn't amp up the war of words, but He fundamentally challenges what it means to be respectable.

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him everything he had, even his clothes, beat him within an inch of his life and dumped him in a ditch. **31** A priest happened to be traveling the same way, and when he saw the man, went out of his way to avoid getting too close. He kept going. **32** So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, ***he took pity on him***. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii[e] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

37 The expert in the law replied, "The one ***who had mercy*** on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and always do the same thing."

I'll tell you why this story is so scandalous – It's a sermon about race and privilege as much as a lesson on compassion and mercy.

The only thing we know of the victim is that he is stark naked and at death's door. We can easily infer from the terms 'priest' and 'levite' that Jesus used is that He is singling out the purest of the pure – those called by God to serve the Jewish people and intercede between man and God.

There's an Innkeeper.

And then there's the Samaritan. The heretic half-breeds who insulted the Jews by their persistent survival. Good Jews wished them dead, or at least ***gone***. They would literally go fifty miles out of their way to avoid setting foot on Samaritan territory. When Jews referred to them, if at all, it was with epithets and slurs, not by their ethnicity. Think of all the rude terms ever spoken in English to refer to people of color, and you get the idea.

I'm certain there were gasps as soon as Jesus uttered the term 'Samaritan' in this story. And what he said about this Samaritan was utterly incomprehensible: When he found the naked, broken body of a man in the ditch, he got down off his donkey, climbed down in that ditch. Discovering him still alive, the Samaritan took that man in his arms and held him. He poured out his own oil and wine to wash the wounds. He undoubtedly took off his own coat to cover the man's shame and – gently as he could – placed him on his own donkey and brought him to a motel. Then the Samaritan spent the whole night nursing this stranger. He emptied his pockets of about $200 and gave it to the motel manager to make sure the man ate and had whatever he needed until this impossible savior could return to settle all the bills.

Friends, the hero of this story is the oppressed and downtrodden – the one shut out and unwelcome. The one who didn't belong on a Jewish highway. The one who could just as easily have been the victim in this story. On the receiving end of a violent crime, just for the color of his skin.

How does all this apply today, you ask?

First of all, Jesus shifted the narrative completely by challenging everything the 'good' people thought they knew about what it means to be good. Notice at the end how the lawyer couldn't even bring himself to use the word 'Samaritan'? The best he could come up with is 'the one who showed mercy.' But by that confession his admitted that it just might be possible that the suspicious person might not necessarily be evil. And that all those who look respectable might not necessarily have the best intentions or the purest hearts.

In one story, Jesus guts the rationale for systemic hate and self-righteousness.

Do you understand how much Jesus shifted the discussion in one illustration? The story of the Good Samaritan should be just as provocative today. In a time when hate is on the rise everywhere we look, this story should crush us. We should be crying out to God with gratitude that there are oppressed people who don't necessarily want to see their oppressors suffer. Who have pity of those who also suffer. Who are compassionate and kind.

So, here's my challenge to you as I close this lesson – when you see the hate, desperation, anger and violence that seems to be rising all around us, what do your emotions tell you? What do they reveal about what you really believe about others?

What did the Good Samaritan's feelings reveal about what ***he*** really believed?

At a time when we feel so certain about things, about our love for God, about our commitment to Him, are we still willing to ask Jesus that all-important question "Who is my neighbor?" Are we willing to risk our certainty for God's answer? For God's heart?

I hope so, with all my heart…