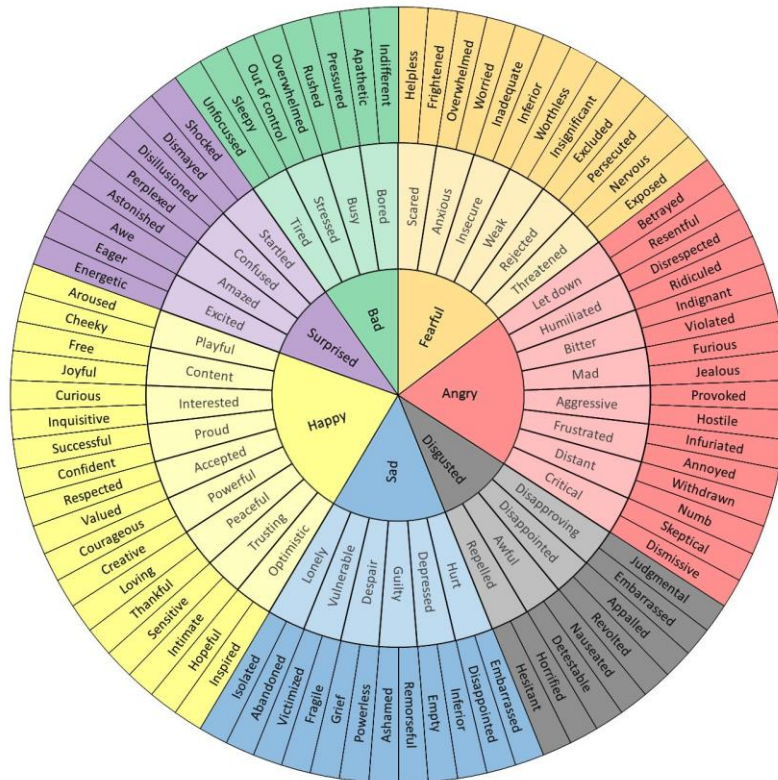


An Emotional Fast



Isaiah 58:5 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble yourselves, but you do not notice? Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? . . . Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, (and) to let the oppressed go free?"

So last week, I noted in my sermon, several recent studies that indicate in this post-pandemic time, that we Americans are now more impatient, more irritable, more distracted, and more exhausted than we were before. So how well are we handling our emotions these days, or are our emotions handling us? This is a timely question given the chronic stress that we have all been facing the last three years. And I, for one, can easily admit that there are times when I am handling my emotions just fine, and yet, there are still other times when my emotions are handling me.

In the end, we human beings are creatures of emotion more than we are creatures of logic. And advertisers, for sure, whether of the political or the consumer kind, know this. They promote their candidate or product by appealing to our emotions, not our logic. Marriage and family therapists know so well how easily and quickly emotions can overpower our ability to reason.

John Gottman, a researcher on relationships, coined the concept of "emotional flooding" to describe the experience of what it feels like when we become hijacked by our emotions or by the emotions of someone else. Our reptilian brains are primed for the fight or flight mentality, and when that part of our brain gets activated, rational thinking is in short supply.

Another way to understand what emotional flooding looks like is to think of the last time you were around a young child

who was over-tired or over-stimulated. In such a state, children can become flooded by emotions; and at that point, it is almost impossible to appeal to their sense of reason. While we adults have greater emotional maturity than children, I hope, we too can become flooded with worry, or fear, or anger, or sadness, or irritability under the right circumstances, and our reasoning too can disappear.

Emotional flooding is not something we outgrow. It can still happen to any of us. I think of the past struggles of this parish, in particular. We can't choose for emotional flooding not to happen. But what we can choose is how we manage it.

Recognizing our triggers and taking responsibility for ourselves when we are emotionally overwhelmed is crucial to managing in a healthy way our own lives and the life of this community. Taking responsibility for our emotions is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of maturity. So, while we never wholly outgrow emotional flooding, we can grow in our ability to manage our stronger feelings.

And so, with the season of Lent quickly approaching, I encourage us all to develop or practice a kind of emotional fast, an intentional focus upon how we are feeling during the forty days of Lent, a time to practice mindfulness and self-reflection about what we are feeling, and how we are handling our feelings. Emotions themselves are not good or bad; they are

not right or wrong. They are simply what we are feeling. We all get to feel what we feel! However, how we *handle* our feelings can make all the difference to our own well-being and to the health of our relationships with one another.

So first, we need to focus on the triggers that cause us to become emotionally flooded? Are we aware of, do we take responsibility for, and do we apologize when our emotions overpower our ability to reason? Or do we just justify our outbursts, become impatient with others, and sometimes even act cruelly to one another? "Do we fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist?"

So, we might all focus this Lent on those things that help us either be less emotionally reactive or help us recenter ourselves when we are overwhelmed by our emotions? One of the warning signs I recognize in myself when I am not managing my emotions well is that I become irritable and impatient in my communication with others. Perhaps this is why I resonate with the advice once given to me that when it comes to good communication, it is wise to strive to, "Say what you mean. Mean what you say. And don't say it mean."

There is much wisdom in these three short sentences. And like many wise sayings, it takes only a moment to memorize them, but a lifetime to master them. Let's reflect briefly on each of

these three sentences as the means for our emotional fast this Lent.

"Say what you mean" describes the importance of having the emotional intelligence to recognize and to express the full range of our very human emotions. So, when someone asks you how you are feeling, don't respond as we so often do by saying we are 'fine.' 'Fine' is not a feeling. Mad, glad, sad, and fear, those are feelings. So, why do we so often say that we are 'fine'? Is it because we are not comfortable sharing our feelings with someone, and if so, why is that? And if that's the case, why not simply say I am not comfortable sharing my feelings right now? 'Uncomfortable' is a feeling, and thus we would be beginning to open up with others, and say what you mean.

Or do we say we are 'fine,' because we don't really know what we are feeling? Or don't allow ourselves to feel what we are feeling? For men, anger is a sign of strength, but expressions of fear and sadness are signs of weakness, such that we often hide them from others, and from ourselves. For women, anger makes you threatening to others, and can make you something that rhymes with a witch. And thus, far too often, we don't really say what we mean, we do not or cannot openly acknowledge how we are feeling, and we end up isolating ourselves from one another, and from ourselves even. It is far

healthier to be vulnerable enough to share what we are really feeling, and to stop pretending that everything is "fine" and that we are "in control."

Secondly, **"Mean what you say"** invites us to reflect on what we are communicating so that it is an accurate expression of what we are feeling. There is a wide and complicated range of human emotions. Check out the so-called "Feeling Wheel" that I had inserted in the bulletins this morning. While we never need to justify what we are feeling, we can often be confused about what we are feeling, or at times we might have mixed emotions. We might be feeling more than one thing at a time, and sometimes we need to reflect for a moment or two to clarify our feelings. Or, we might not understand why we are feeling the way we are feeling. Sadly some people don't want to reveal their emotions if they don't understand why they are feeling that way. I know that Lisa and I have established the habit of letting each other know sometimes when we are just feeling "fragile," often without understanding why we are feeling fragile, but by so declaring it we allow each other to be more patient and gentle with the another. Thus, it is important to honestly share our feelings, if we want to share our lives with one another, as a couple, and as a community of faith. We need to mean what you say.

Finally, we need to **"Don't say it mean,"** which is often the most challenging advice for many of us to follow. Somewhere

along the line, it seems we got the idea that we can increase our chances of being heard by raising our voices, often in anger or in disgust. Yet, psychologists know that attempting to increase our persuasive power by raising our voices actually has the opposite effect. People instead shut down and stop listening when we are mean.

Sadly, every one of us at times can and will "say it mean." It happens to all of us, and when it does, we need to be careful not to be too hard on ourselves, for we are human after all. But we also need to apologize when we are mean, to learn from what happened and why we became mean, so as to grow a little wiser when it comes to handling our emotions.

In the end, it is natural at times to be overwhelmed by our emotions and to feel like they are handling us rather than that we are handling them. Whenever we find ourselves overwhelmed, it is wise to call a timeout and wait until we are sure we won't say or do something we'll later regret. We need to practice an emotional fast. When we have calmed down, we will be more able to "say what we mean, mean what we say, and not say it mean." This is what I suggest we all practice this Lent.

For we have all gone through something extraordinary together in this pandemic. A study by Samantha Brooks of King's College London finds that quarantine produces a range of bad mental health outcomes, including trauma, confusion, and anger.

And it takes time to work through those emotions. We'll be more resilient if we can see others experiencing it in the same way. We need to be mindful and self-reflective, because "being together is not the same as being connected," declared Professor Welch. She recommends that people engage in deep intentional and vulnerable conversations in which they pause – for as long as 90 seconds – after something important has been said, just to let it sink in, to have time to share the feeling, to 'try it on.' "You have to have the feelings conversation," she says to maintain healthy relationships.

Anna Freud's famous research found that during World War II the children left in London to endure the bombings surprisingly suffered less trauma than the children who were sent away by their families to the country for their "safety." She determined that the physical injury is often not the harshest part of trauma; it's the breakdown of relationships during and after, again I think of the recent history of this parish.

So now, Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth; but if that salt loses its taste, it is no longer good for anything, but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. We are also the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid, should not be hid, just as we should not hide our emotions, but rather share them with one another, so we can build up this community of faith and prosper. AMEN.