

Sermon: Goodnight Moon

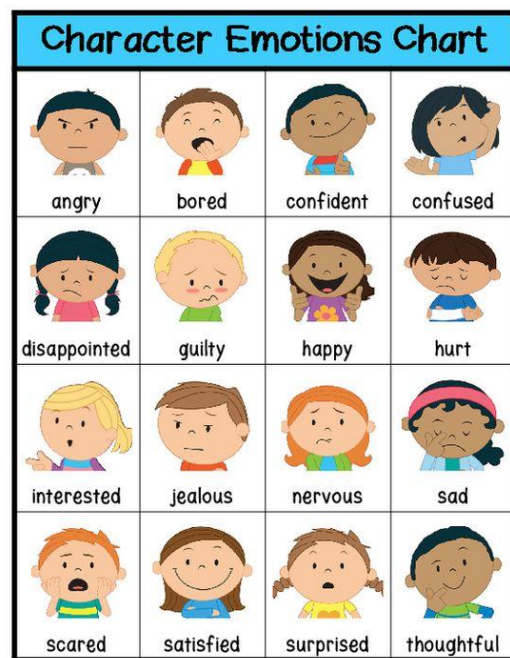
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Scripture: Jeremiah 29:4-11, Matthew 11:25-30

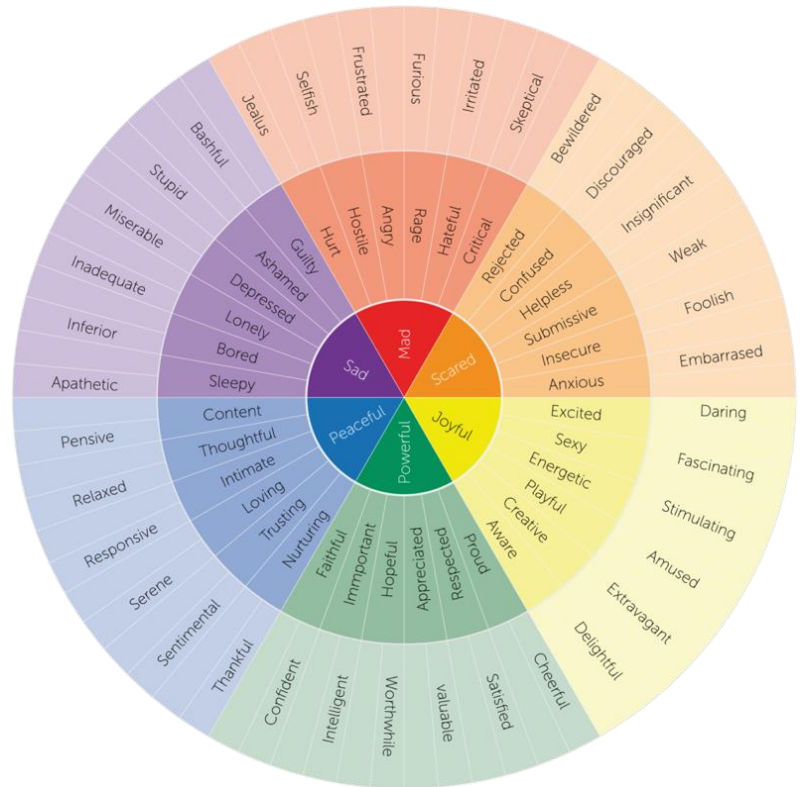
When I was a kid, I was told I had too many feelings. I felt “too much.” I would cry over just about anything that felt the slightest bit embarrassing or produced any kind of anxiety in me. I was a relatively smart kid who did well in school, I played well enough in sports, and had friends, but was painfully, excruciatingly shy, hyper-self-critical, and introverted. So, any time I would get called on in class, any time I got an answer wrong, any time I was put on the spot, I would shrink, want to hide, and often, I would cry. Few people knew what to do with a child who felt things so intensely, so I was eventually sent to a counselor, but it would take me well into adulthood to deal with the big feelings I felt over even seemingly small things.

One of the lessons I learned early on as a parent is that as much as you want your kids only to get the best parts of you, inevitably, they will also get some of the harder bits as well. Since I was a child with big feelings surrounded by adults who didn’t know quite how to respond to them, I try hard to respond to my kids’ emotions sensitively, but even I have trouble dealing with all the meltdowns of childhood. I learned when the boys were little that as a parent, you must get used to big feelings that can’t be contained in the tiny bodies of our children. They understand just enough about the world to have all these feelings, but do not have the coping skills and experience to understand why or what to do with them.

When Weston was in preschool after having been diagnosed with autism, he was sent home all kinds of resources. One of those was this chart of emotions that were purported to help him identify what he was feeling. This chart attempts to draw clear lines between the emotions so that children, autistic or not, can distinguish them when they happen. The idea is that recognizing them will help the kids and



parents to know appropriate ways to respond. This was helpful for Weston and for me, as his mother, but I soon realized that these emotions, while often easy to tell apart, also sometimes had a fine line that separated them. It wasn't until I was in Clinical Pastoral Education that I was shown a slightly more helpful chart (next slide), which shows just how closely linked these emotions really are. We can see, for instance, that excitement is part of joy (all in yellow) and that's all well and good, but it is also closely related to anxiety (in orange), which falls under the "scared" category. I think this is why emotions can seem to so drastically swing from one seeming extreme to another. The boundaries between emotions are porous and it's easy to tip back and forth between them ... we're all just individuals with a ball of emotions boiling right under the surface. It's hard for adults to identify what's happening within themselves sometimes and we've got decades upon decades of experience with feeling. Imagine how much more challenging that is for our children?



Yet, despite all our experience, the world teaches us to push our negative or "dark" emotions down. We're uncomfortable with sadness, anger, and fear. And we're uncomfortable with them in part because we don't know what to do with them. We don't want to feel them, so we try to flee from them as quickly as we can. When we aren't happy or comfortable 100% of the time, we think something is wrong with us. Most of us really don't understand just how closely linked all of our emotions are, so we think we're a mess, when the reality is that, as Glennon Doyle says, "We're feeling people in a messy world."

When we don't let ourselves feel what we feel, we cannot properly process what's happening around and within us—and when we can't properly process those things, it leads to all kinds of dysfunction. But to process them, we must confront them... and that is uncomfortable. In that way, it's a lot like Lent. Lent is an uncomfortable season, it's a wilderness season that forces us to confront the side of our faith that aligns more closely with darkness than with light. We don't say the "A-word" (alleluia), most churches don't light the Paschal candle during this time, we use darker colors, and carry on with a somewhat less jubilant tone, even on Sundays, which are always, technically, "little Easters." We talk about the 40 days of Lent happening between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, but there are actually 46 days. That's because Sundays aren't technically part of Lent. It's the reason why you see that we are in the second Sunday in Lent and not *of* Lent. Technically, if you give something up for Lent, you can have it again on Sundays during lent because they are always "little Easter," even during the Lenten season. But generally, even if Sunday isn't technically *of* Lent, we treat it that way during this season of penitence, reflection, prayer, and fasting.

I must laugh a little bit when I look at the chart to the left of me because, as you can see, the Lenten color purple encompasses the "sad" section, the lighter shades of which include feelings like "guilty, ashamed, depressed, lonely, miserable, and inferior." And just beside that are the feelings of peacefulness: "pensive, thoughtful, responsive, sentimental, and serene." Any one of these emotions could easily fit into our Lenten days, couldn't they? Lent is not an extravagant time, even for our emotions.

Last week, we launched into our Lenten sermon series, "Lunar Faith," wherein we examine darkness, literal and figurative. We're doing this with the guidance of scripture and Barbara Brown Taylor's phenomenal book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. In her chapter titled, "Dark Emotions," Taylor turns her examination inward, to the inner darkness we each have, the parts of ourselves that many of us are least comfortable with.

Taylor begins with the thing we all have most in common: beds, where almost all of us spend the darkest hours of the day. Chances are, all of us have at some point or other, struggled with sleep. In the Bible, beds are the birthplace of many of life's emotions. Taylor records that it's "where

you beget children, give birth, pray, dream, weep, languish, and die” (76). Bed, she writes, “is where you face your nearness to or farness from God,” it is, “where you come face-to-face with what really matters because it is too dark for most of your usual, shallowing distractions to work” (76). We’ve all been there, struggling to sleep in the outer darkness of our rooms while also, and often, struggling with the inner darkness of our own psyches. This inner darkness is what we spend the daytime hours running away from until we are left alone in the literal darkness with no light left in which to hide from them.

These dark emotions that sneak up on us in the middle of the night have all sorts of causes—real and imagined. Some of them, the result of grief or trauma, can be harder to sort through. In the noise of day, it’s easy to put them aside, but in the cold dark of night, it’s harder. When things are quiet and we’re left alone with our thoughts, this can seem like a dangerous place to be.

The letter of Jeremiah to the exiles in Jeremiah 29 comes to them in the context of their own trauma as a community who has suffered and lost everything—their homes, their city, their language and culture, everything that is familiar to them has been destroyed. They are in the midst of a darkness in Babylon they could not have imagined and they are left with few reserves. Their darkness isn’t just outside of them and found in their circumstances, but also within each of them as they seek a way forward as individuals and as a community.

The beauty of this letter, for me at least, is the ways in which it doesn’t run from the destruction and the dark emotions that surround it. Jeremiah 29:11 is one of those verses that is used to comfort us in difficult times—and for good reason. It speaks of God’s promises not to leave the exiles in a state of disaster, but to provide for their welfare that they might have a hopeful future. It’s a hopeful verse, but in the context of this letter, it comes after God has given them some rather blunt instructions: these are your circumstances and you’re going to have to make the best of them. He tells them to build houses, plant gardens, be fruitful and multiply. In other words: you’re going to be here a while. You can’t just exist here, you have to *live* here.

The exiled community is going to have to learn the principle of my wife taught me called, “radical acceptance.” In psychology, this stratagem is used as a distress tolerance skill that keeps

pain from turning into suffering. This is different than telling people to be positive about a bad situation and then they'll feel better. This is different than telling someone to pray and it will go away. Sometimes, when we are grieving a loss or suffering in the aftermath of a trauma, it can be tempting to dwell in an in-between state where we are stuck in thoughts like, "why me," "this isn't fair," "I can't bear this." It's not saying you approve of what's happening, but it is a wholehearted acceptance of what is out of our control in order that you can move forward. It's taking those dark emotions and saying, "I'm feeling what I'm feeling because this is *happening*, no matter how unfair the circumstances may be. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles has the Lord moving them through a state of, "Woe is me," wherein they are in denial or fighting back against what has already happened and into a state of radical acceptance. It's saying, it is what it is. Now what?

Staying in a state of "why me?" is like trying to hide the pain you feel at night in the bright light of day. It prolongs the pain and turns it into suffering. Barbara Brown Taylor points to the wisdom of letting emotions flow, feeling them, even the dark ones, so that we can deal with them rather than pushing them away or hiding them. What would have happened if those caught up in the Babylonian exile could not have gotten to a place of radical acceptance? The verses that follow this one in Jeremiah say this, "When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will give heed to you. You will search for me and find me, if only you seek me wholeheartedly." If they can learn to radically accept this wilderness season, acknowledge their circumstances, they will find that God is worthy of their trust because God keeps God's promises.

In the gospel called Matthew, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." In our faith, I think sometimes we make things much, much harder than they need to be. We fight back against everything we don't like, even if it's good for others, in an effort to hold onto our comfort, our power, our way of life. We hold so tight to the way things should be or the way things were that we can't move into the way things *are*. The religious experts of Jesus's day held so tightly to the yoke of the way they'd always done things that they couldn't see the wisdom in the yoke Jesus was sharing. Here is Jesus saying, you're making this

so much harder than it needs to be. Love God, love others. All the rest is filler. It's exposition. It's not the point. Let go of those burdens and focus on what I'm saying. In those teachings, you will find rest.

In the middle of the night, when we're stuck amid the dark emotions, rather than trying to push them away, what if you sit with them, accept them, and allow them to teach you what they're going to teach you? I'd wager the Babylonians learned a whole lot as they sat in the middle their wilderness season with the assurance of God's promise to give them hope. God is telling them to root themselves where they are and allow the pain of exile to teach them what it has to teach them, while God walks beside them and cares for them.

But they could have stayed in that in between space. They could have fought back. Sometimes, it seems easier to run from the tough stuff. Taylor writes, "Who would want to stick around and wrestle a dark angel all night long if there were any chance of escape? The only answer I can think of is this: someone in deep need of blessing; someone willing to limp forever for the blessing that follows the wound" (85). There are things we can learn in the darkness, in the tough stuff, in the hardest moments, in the most desperate of wilderness seasons, in the midst of the long slog of Lent that we can't in the light, or in the easy moments, or in the extravagance of Easter. Last week, we talked about full solar spirituality that runs toward the light, runs toward the alleluia, that runs toward the resurrection forgetting that we've got to have Good Friday if we're ever to get to resurrection Sunday. We must learn to embrace lunar faith as much as we do full solar spirituality if we want a resilient faith that can survive the darkest nights as well as the brightest days. As Taylor writes, "the nights when the old moon vanishes from sight are the same nights the new moon is being born" (88). We could look at that chart of emotions and pretend we're going to live in the bright yellows and greens in the bright sun of midday, but we'd be fools not to acknowledge the feelings that are so closely linked to those, the dark emotions that will come to visit in the night. If we can learn to embrace the lunar faith of the exiles, to radically accept that the old moon is gone, to trust in the promises of God and lay our burdens at Jesus's feet, then we, too, might learn how to walk in the dark. We might be able to say, "Goodnight" to the old moon, recognizing that that new moon is just around the corner. Amen.