

This sermon delivered by
Dr. Lane Alderman, Pastor
Roswell Presbyterian Church
Roswell, Ga. February 4, 2007

“Since Jesus is Lord ... Of My Emotions”
John 7:37-39

I ran across a great cartoon the other day in one of the journals I subscribe to. A man has just cut down a tree in his front yard, and it has accidentally fallen right across his neighbor's car.

Now the neighbor is apparently a minister, and he's outside going berserk at the sight of this huge tree lying across his car. And the man holding the chain saw says rather innocently to this hysterical neighbor, "Look Stan, I'm sorry about your car. But frankly, I am appalled that you, being a pastor, would allow yourself to become upset over something like this."

Well, we're going to talk about getting upset today. More than that, we're going to talk about emotions. And if you think that ministers somehow have their emotions all completely under control, you're wrong!

All of us have emotional struggles. All of us know that to be drained emotionally can be far more tiring than to be drained physically. Emotions are a powerful force in our lives.

So how do we deal with our emotions? How do we handle depression, anger, grief, anxiety? Each one is a topic for a series of sermons by itself, and at different times along the line, we have dealt with each of those in sermons; but are there any general guidelines from the Scriptures to help us get off the emotional rollercoaster so many seem to be trapped on?

We're in the middle of our series of sermons on what it means to affirm that Jesus is Lord. We began last week with the strong affirmation that if we claim to be Christian, if we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, then we are affirming that Jesus is Lord—he's in charge, he's in control—not just of my spiritual life, but of everything.

Jesus is Lord—Jesus Kurios. He's Lord of my physical body. We talked about that last week. Next week, we'll examine what it means to say he is Lord of our home; and the week after that, we'll examine his Lordship over our future.

But today, reflect with me on what it means to say Jesus is Lord of my emotions. Let's take a look at a passage of Scripture from the gospel of John. Listen once more to the Word of God.

— Read John 7: 37-39 —

Now before we get to some Biblical principles, I want to make some preliminary observations. And I need to say quickly—we're not going to turn this into a psychology lecture. Goodness knows, I'm not qualified for that. These are some observations any one of us could make.

I remind you, first of all, that our physical state affects our emotional state. Now you knew that already, but it bears repeating. Sometimes when we find ourselves caught up in emotional turmoil, it may have a physical explanation. We all know that when we're sick we get provoked easier, we're more emotional. When we're tired physically, it affects our emotions. We've all experienced that.

It may be the emotional rollercoaster you find yourself on has a physiological source—there's something physical that's put you in emotional turmoil. It may be that what we need to do is go see our doctor or take a quick look at our physical condition or get a better night sleep.

But let's make a second preliminary observation. When they are not caused by some physical conditions, emotions are the outward expression of an inner need or conviction. ***Emotions are the symptom—the outward display—of something that's going on inside of us.***

Emotions spring from deep inside us. In fact, the Hebrew people understood very well that emotions are an outward display of something going on inside us. They thought our stomach was the origin of our emotions. In our New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus says in verse 38, “out of the believer’s heart shall flow,” and the Greek word there isn't the word for heart—it's koilias, which mean literally stomach and intestine.

That's where we feel the deepest emotions—down in our gut, and the first century world assumed that's where they came from.

Emotions are an outward display of something going on inside us. You're standing at a baseball game listening to the national anthem, and you see a tear form in the eye of a normally tough old man, and you know, deep down inside, there's some memory, some stirring conviction caught up in that tear.

You see a single parent at the grocery store lash out in anger at her child, and you know, deep down inside, there's hurt and bitterness, not at the child, but at a spouse who left at such a terrible time.

A lonely widow suddenly cries for no apparent reason, and you know something has stirred a memory inside that pours out in those tears.

A child is anxious for no obvious reason, but you know deep inside there exists some need, some fear.

Emotions—when they are not based on a physical condition—emotions are the outer expression of something felt deep within our souls.

Well, let's make some Biblical observations about these emotions. In good Presbyterian fashion, I have three principles to offer.

FIRST OF ALL, NOTE WITH ME THAT EMOTIONS ARE PART OF OUR NATURAL BEING. God made them, and therefore they were intended for good. Emotions are intended to be a good thing.

Tears can be therapeutic. We need to release some emotional energy and blow off steam. It's good to be able to feel and experience the joys of life. Emotions are a good thing.

Some people try to avoid the rollercoaster and the turmoil by turning off their emotions. They become emotional black holes. They suck in on themselves. They never let themselves get hurt because they never let themselves express much emotion.

Remember Simon and Garfunkel's song? "I am a rock, I am island. And a rock feels no pain and an island never cries."

It's true—a rock feels no pain. But it feels no joy, no excitement, no thrill of life either. There's something good about that tear shed during the national anthem. There's something good about goose bumps when you're with that special person. Hard to believe, but even Presbyterians in Sunday morning worship ought to be stirred emotionally from time to time. It's okay to show emotion on Sunday morning.

Emotions are part of God's good creation. Oh, they have a dark side, to be sure. They can be used to manipulate us. I'm sorry to say preachers are among the experts at knowing how to manipulate people with emotions. But it's a cheap trick when a preacher uses a gut-wrenching story just to bring you to tears. Oh, there are times those tears are appropriate, but if they're just to manipulate, then that's out of bounds.

But emotions can do that. They can cloud our reasoning. When we are emotionally distraught, we can't think correctly, we lose our sense of logic. They can paralyze us. Emotions can literally keep a person from being able to get out of bed in the morning.

Emotions have a dark side. But we need to affirm first of all, emotions are intended for good. They are a God-given part of life—given to us to feel and to enjoy the goodness of God's world. There's nothing wrong with expressing emotion. We don't have to be a stiff-upper-lipped Stoic people!

But let's move on. A second Biblical principle: **GOD INTENDS FOR US TO CONTROL OUR EMOTIONS—NOT FOR OUR EMOTIONS TO CONTROL US.** Listen to what Psalm 112 says about those who live in a relationship with the Lord. "Their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord. Their hearts are steady." The Psalmist is a person whose emotions are under control.

But too often, we let our emotions have a life of their own. We're angry, and without even thinking, we lash out in some hurtful attack.

Or we let others control our emotions. It's as if we carry a little box around that controls our emotions, and we hand it to other people and say, "Here, push this button, that button will make me mad. Here push this button, that'll depress me when you do that."

And we say things like, "You make me so mad." But think about it. You can't make me mad. I choose to get mad. I can choose to get mad in response to something you do. But it's my choice. You can't make me mad. God intends for us to control our emotions—not for them to control us—nor for other people to control our emotions.

God intends for our hearts, our emotions, to be steady and firm.

Emotions are a good thing—a great expression of life—but God never intended for us to be the slave of our emotions. He intends for them to be under our control—not vice versa.

So how do we achieve that control? Well that's our third principle.

GOD BRINGS CONTROL TO OUR EMOTIONS BY DEALING WITH THE NEED EXPRESSED BY THAT EMOTION. Remember, emotions express some inner conviction or need. If you find yourself caught in an emotional turmoil, I have good news for you. God cares about the need that turmoil is expressing.

God cares—he cares about our deepest hurts and needs.

What is it that makes the heart of our Psalmist steady and firm? Why isn't this person on an emotional rollercoaster? Go back today and read Psalm 112. Make a note of that. The writer is a person who lives in a close, intimate, personal relationship with God.

He trusts his future to God, he makes his decisions based on the principles of God. He's generous with his blessings, he treats others with justice and fairness.

In short, his emotions are in control because he lives in a relationship with the God who touches and meets his deepest needs. Now please, this is not some simplistic formula. If you're down and depressed, all you need to do is get right with God—read your Bible and pray and everything will be okay. That's not it. It's rarely that simple.

Sometimes learning to deal with our emotions takes time. Sometimes it takes counseling, guidance from a trusted Christian counselor. Sometimes it takes intense pain.

But through it all, God is at work, meeting our needs, touching our lives at our most vulnerable points to give us the strength and the courage we need to face tomorrow.

So here we are—caught up on an emotional rollercoaster, desperately wanting some relief. We've let our emotions take control, and it's wearing us out. Or perhaps we've bottled up all our emotions, and we're afraid to let them out. What can we do? Where can we go? How can we keep from letting adversity destroy us emotionally?

Well, if that describes you—and I suspect in one way or another it describes us all at one time or another—then I want to invite you to meet a God who cares and who will meet those deepest needs. Spend some time getting to know this God who wants the very best for us. Talk to one of your ministers, to a Christian friend, to a counselor about the role God plays in your life.

If you struggle with anxiety, then I invite you to meet the God who holds the future in his hand, the God who has promised to never leave us or forsake us, the God who can meet you at that anxious moment and say it'll be okay.

If you carry a burden of guilt or hurt which too often lashes out in anger, then meet the God who forgives—the God who went all the way to a cross to give us new life and the God who by his very presence can calm the heat of anger. He's forgiven us, and he gives us the ability and the strength to forgive others as well.

If you face depression, meet the God who gives hope—the God who reminds us there is a tomorrow.

Jesus understood that our outward emotions are an expression of what's inside our hearts. A lack of trust may lead to anxious emotions; an unstable self esteem may lead to angry put downs; a deep loneliness may lead to tears of depression.

What's inside here wells up in our emotional life. Jesus understood that.

And he offered his disciples—he offers us—an amazing invitation. Let my Spirit dwell within you, he says, let God fill you and touch you at that point of greatest need, and from your heart—from your stomach, literally, the text says—from the deepest seat of your emotions, will flow rivers of living water—joy—peace—contentment—wholeness and life. It's almost as if God's emotions—love, joy, and peace—become our emotions.

I want to invite you this morning to be open to that life-giving Spirit. This is not a simplistic formula. It may take time, it may take counseling, but the good news is—God cares.

I invite you to let him into that deepest point and trust him with that deepest need.

The circumstances around you may not be any different. That person who aggravates and frustrates you may not change. That child that worries you may not be any different.

But through the trust, the power, the grace of Almighty God—you and I will grow and change and mature.

As our relationship with Christ grows more and more secure, I'm confident of this—even our emotions will become more stable. Remember, emotions are a good thing. And we'll find we can laugh and enjoy the pleasures of life even when there are still painful memories of hurt

rattling around in minds. We can love and be loved in return even when there are memories of hurt sitting there in the past.

We Presbyterians don't talk about emotions very much. But I pray for anyone here today who feels the torment of emotional pain and hurt; and I pray for that growth in Christ, that it may be said of us all that even though the storms of life rage all around us, he has a heart that is steady, she has a heart that is secure.

May it be said out of your life and mine—from the deepest point of our emotion—flow the joy and the peace of the life-giving Spirit of God. May it be so. May it be so. AMEN.