

Sermon June 16, 2024
[2 Corinthians 5:6-17]

To the Lutherans: Emotions Are Not Always Bad
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Grace to you and peace this morning from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

To the Lutherans: Emotions are not always bad.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have a problem with— what do you call them? Feelings.

Only, it's not really feelings; it's more like— emotions.

Only, it's not merely emotions; it's more like— excessive display of emotions.

Only, it's not just excessive displays of emotions; it's more like: *excessive displays of emotions in the context of a worship service*. Yes, that's it!

I'm guessing I'm not alone when it comes to feeling uneasy about excessive displays of emotion during worship, the most famous of which is: speaking in tongues. I mean, never mind that the Apostle Paul identifies ways of assisting others. He calls it "forms of assistance." I think of our Visitation Team.

Never mind that the Apostle Paul identifies this as a spiritual gift, as well as gifts of healing, and forms of leadership. I think of the Church Council as gifts of the Spirit that are there to provide for the common good the congregation.

And never mind that the Apostle Paul lists "speaking in tongues" *last* among the spiritual gifts, including those I just named.

And never mind, the Apostle Paul considers speaking in tongues the most problematic, because it draws attention to the person doing it, rather than building up the community *around* that person, which is the purpose of spiritual gifts.

This is why Paul says— and I love this quotation. It's from First Corinthians 14— "I prefer five words of the mind to 10,000 words of the tongue."

And never mind that Martin Luther interprets speaking in tongues liturgically, that is, in the context of worship, as the reading of the lessons. So, it would be *Susan* who is speaking in tongues— the readings of the lessons; and the interpretation of tongues as explaining the meaning of these lessons to you, the congregation— so *I* am an interpreter of tongues.

Now, the reason Luther could say this, is that neither he nor the contemporary Pentecostal movement had access to what this experience actually *was* in the first century. We only have guesses at best. You can see, then, why Luther would interpret it liturgically, whereas in Pentecostal churches, it becomes an individual expression of being filled with the Spirit.

Speaking in tongues, and its corollary, "being slain in the Spirit," nevertheless, in spite of Paul's caution, dominate the Pentecostal experience of God, especially in the context of worship. And I have to confess, I don't know if you've ever experienced someone

speaking in tongues or seen someone slain in the Spirit, but it makes me uncomfortable. It makes me uneasy.

Let me explain why. Setting, for the moment, my Scandinavian heritage aside, years ago, I attended a Pentecostal service while I was in seminary. It was part of an assignment for a course called “Reading Congregations.” About 15 minutes into the service, a woman came down the aisle yelling and crying, only to collapse 10 feet away from me.

Now I’ve seen people collapse during Lutheran services since then. Susan is a great example, and that is not a good thing. (She gave me permission to say that.) So my first thought was, as it was later, “Call an ambulance!” Call an ambulance.

But then I watched as two ushers came – and Don and Denny, I want you to pay attention to this – I watched as two ushers came, gently picked her up, and helped her to the back of the sanctuary. Then they sat down – as if they’d done this a million times, as if this was a normal part of worship.

Later, in fact, I watched as two more people were “slain in the Spirit,” both times of which took me, as Cantor Kyle likes to say, “out of church,” – they undermined my focus and made me feel uneasy.

Now, I think my uneasiness stems from the fact that some people, not all, but some people, elevate themselves over others who don’t have these experiences, something that deeply concerned the Apostle Paul. It’s also the case that these excessive displays of emotion can transfer the focus we have on God to the people having them, as it did for me in the Pentecostal service I mentioned.

I think, finally, that these experiences can, though not always, become addictive, something my professor at the time confirmed by sharing that the church I attended, which was in downtown San Francisco, near the Tenderloin District, attracted a lot of former drug users, who subconsciously equated being in the Spirit or speaking in tongues with getting high.

But that doesn’t mean experiences like this should all be dismissed, just because they make Lutherans like me, and evidently my professor in seminary, uncomfortable. Sometimes, the experience of transcendence – which means literally “to go above” or “rise beyond” – the experience of transcendence can be so overwhelming in church, that it grasps us at the core of our being. It makes us want to sing boldly, even shout, something we see beautifully in the tradition of African American spirituals, and something I hope you felt in the singing of our gathering hymn.

These moments cause us to be *beside ourselves*, something about which the Apostle Paul speaks in our Second Reading for today. Now, Paul speaks of a range of experiences or emotions that express faith. He talks about – I love this one – “sighing too deep for words,” as an expression of prayer informed by the Holy Spirit in Romans 8. He talks about the experience of *joy*, something that that we capture on the eve of Christmas. Paul talks about the experience of *gratitude*, of that deep thankfulness for the sheer

effect of our being and the renewal of our being. He speaks repeatedly of grace, or love, of liberation, freedom, and as we heard about today in the forum on spirituals, *release*. And as I mentioned, Paul talks about being “beside ourselves before God” in Second Corinthians 5:13.

So, what does it mean to be “beside oneself”, as Paul says, in Greek — that is the language Paul spoke and wrote? Well, translations of this phrase, again, it’s verse 13 of the Second Reading, vary. Here are some examples:

“If we are out of our minds,
If it seems we are crazy,
If we have lost our minds,
and even,
If we are insane, — it is for God.”

The Greek word itself, *exestemon*, comes from, or illustrates where we get, the word “ecstasy,” which means, literally, “to stand outside oneself.” So that prefix “ex,” goes back to *Exodus*, where the Jews are drawn out of Egypt, it goes to people who get in trouble at school, who are *expelled*. And here, ecstasy means, as in those cases, “to be taken out of” or “to be standing outside of oneself,” perhaps even “to forget oneself.”

So why does Paul bring this up? That is, his reference to “being beside ourselves”? And why on earth does it matter?

One commentator, I think, answers it perfectly. He writes, “In Second Corinthians, Paul’s opponents may have derided him for his *lack* of ecstatic experiences, to which Paul answers by distinguishing between being beside ourselves — being crazy, being insane, being out of our minds — I think the latter is the best of these interpretations — having an ecstatic experience — and being in our *right* mind.

The former has to do with God. We are beside ourselves before God. We are ecstatic before God.

The latter has to do with Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians. “Before *you*, we are in our right mind.”

In other words, to cite another commentary, “True apostles are authenticated *not* by their religious experiences, however impressive, but by their devotion to those to whom they have been sent with the Gospel. Indeed, we have been freed from the endless quest for status, and honor, to be an influencer, or to be seen, and freed *for* service to others, losing ourselves.”

Now, let’s put this all together. Why does Paul’s affirmation of “being beside ourselves” matter?

Well, I think the answer is clear. Lutherans, at least Scandinavian and German Lutherans, are known for downplaying religious experiences. They are known, going back to Luther himself, to be distrustful of excessive displays of emotions, like I am. There were a group of Prophets, for example, who swept through Wittenberg in 1521.

Luther called them *Schwärmgeisters*. These are people who claimed to have had ecstatic experiences. *Schwärmgeisters*, which, from the German, means going about in a manner of a beehive gone bad.

In some cases, I think this distrust of ecstatic or religious experience is understandable and to be affirmed. People can lord themselves over others, as Paul knew, based on having ecstatic or, in our context, conversion experiences.

We see that today in evangelical circles, when people boast of being born again, as opposed to those Christians who are not. We see it in Pentecostal services, when people who speak in tongues or are slain in the Spirit look down on other Christians like us who do not necessarily have these experiences.

And yet, and yet, rather than disparage Pentecostals, Paul gives us the opportunity to reflect on perhaps quieter, more subtle experiences of “forgetting ourselves before God,” as Lutheran Christians. Maybe it’s through acts of service, when we lose ourselves in love for the neighbor, or maybe it’s during a worship service itself. Think, for example, about your experience when receiving Holy Communion. Or think of how a line from a song, a reading, or, yes, even a sermon, can suddenly leap out at you, and cause you momentarily to forget yourself, to stand outside of yourself.

We need that experience as human beings. You see, the self is a burden, as psychologists going all the way back to Søren Kierkegaard in the 19th century confirm. Indeed, Kierkegaard called despair, “the inability to get rid of oneself.”

In short, we need healthy, communal activities to stand outside ourselves, to experience being overtaken, even moved to tears before what matters most – by feelings of awe, feelings of gratitude, feelings of wonder, feelings of joy, feelings of love, and even feelings of inner stillness.

So stop. Stop. Reflect on your experience in worship, or in moments throughout the week, where you take time to reflect, to pause, to serve others, and, in the process, experience what it means to be beside yourself, or forgetting yourself.

Perhaps then, like me, you’ll see you don’t have to be Pentecostal to be beside yourself. You just need a wider sense of how the Spirit is moving your heart, during worship, in Word and through song, but also in subtler, quieter ways.

May all of us attend to those experiences. May all of us take the time, as you’ve done this Sunday, to be part of a community of faith where those experiences can happen. And may all of us build up one another, irrespective of the experiences we have.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.