



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone*

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## “What Drives You?”

**2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45**

This morning’s newspaper carried these stories: “Four Dead in Two-County Killing Spree” in upstate New York. Down in Stockton, a high school teacher admitted she had sex with a 16-year-old boy, and now will face the consequences. In Italy, a young woman from the U.S. is going on trial for the stabbing death of her roommate.

We have a category for these kinds of crimes. We call them “crimes of passion”, because emotion seems to be driving these acts. In an episode of, say, “Law and Order”, you get to see (sometimes not until the climax at the end) what was bugging the perpetrator—greed, jealousy, pride, revenge, or something else. “Greed” or “jealousy” and the rest are really scaffoldings on which are hung one or more of the four basic emotions—sad, mad, glad, or scared.

The Bible is full of examples of people driven by emotions. We can think of Samson in the book of Judges, pulling down the pagan auditorium’s pillars, dying himself in a mad effort to destroy the building with his tormentors in it. The anger of revenge was clearly driving him. He was mad.

I think of the first King of Israel, King Saul, who (in an account from First Samuel in our Bibles) was supposed to wait for the prophet Samuel to come and pray for success in a battle, and when Samuel did not come at the expected time--and Saul’s volunteer army was getting cold feet and deserting him one by one-- Saul quickly prayed instead, and gave orders for the engagement. Then Samuel does show up and Saul is caught; he had been scared, and his fear drove him to violate what God had told him. Fear overcame his trust in God; his head was no match for his heart. And Israel’s army lost the battle that day, and Saul was rejected by God from continuing to rule, and he gradually went nuts. Fear is a powerful driver, and it drives a lot of us. We can be afraid of what others think of us, afraid of what others may want to do to us, afraid of losing power or place. Yep, fear is a biggie.

Jesus had some good friends living not too far from Jerusalem (John chapter 11 tells us)-- a man named Lazarus who was sick, and his sisters. The sisters sent a message to Jesus about their brother’s illness, confident that Jesus would come and heal him. But Jesus delayed, and Lazarus died. Then Jesus deliberately goes to his friends’ village, knowing full well that Lazarus is dead, and it’s no wonder Martha meets him and bawls him out. She is in high grief over losing her brother, the provider for herself and her sister. “If you had been here, my brother would not have died!” Sadness was driving her meeting with Jesus.

And, yes, gladness can also drive us. Think of the first resurrection accounts, where various women meet the Risen Lord, and want to hold on to him and never let him go. Jesus has to tell Mary, for example, to stop holding on to him, for he has other people to meet as well. (That’s John chapter 20.)

But this morning, I want to focus on some particular passages in more detail, and consider with you how emotions drive us—and how we can make them work for God. First case: find Second Kings, chapter 5. Elisha the prophet had been faithfully serving God, when a major challenge arose. Naaman, the commander of the Aramean army that had recently beaten up on the Israelites, was seeking healing from Elisha. See if you can get in touch with Naaman's emotions in this account from Second Kings. Listen for God's Word to us THIS MORNING, as I read verses 1-14. *[text]*

Naaman was a big man—one of the most important men in an important nation. He was pretty desperate, wouldn't you guess, to get rid of this dreaded skin disease—desperate enough to finally seek help from a healer in a nation he had recently defeated in battle?! It reminds me of how people suffering from, say, cancer, and seeking medical attention in the U.S. and not getting the results, will go to Mexico or overseas, seeking relief. I read Naaman as desperate. When he got word of the healing opportunity in Israel, he asks his king to support a trip there. There's political drama in this, too. Israel's king knows full well how powerful this general is, and is afraid this is a set-up for Naaman to bring a large army and wipe out who-knows-how-many. But that's not Naaman's concern.

Naaman just wants to get healed. He'll even “lower himself” and go to this healer of the defeated nation. And when he gets to Elisha's house, Elisha “does not even have the courtesy”—as Naaman sees it—to come himself, but dispatches a servant to bring instructions to the general. And not only that, what Elisha tells him to do is so simple, so ordinary, that Naaman cannot believe there is anything to this. Maybe this healer is making sport of him, because he has beaten Israel's army? Naaman is miffed. But his servants get him to turn around and do what the prophet had prescribed, and indeed, Naaman finally gets the healing he has sought for so long. Read the rest of the story; there's more good stuff there.

But for today, we're focusing on the emotions as drivers of our lives. For Naaman, his pride in his power and victory was getting in his way. He was “in a rage”, the text says, and is walking away from the very thing that he wants and would do him the most good. I'd say emotion was driving this guy's life, wouldn't you?

Next case: a healing of a leper by Jesus. This is in Mark's gospel in the New Testament, chapter 1. Listen again for the Word of God to you and me. *[text]*

This healing is more straightforward. This man is not so powerful that he has a pride problem. He falls on his knees in front of Jesus, and begs for help. And in an instant, Jesus commands, and the man is healed, made clean of this contagious skin disease that had exiled him from family and friends, lest they be contaminated, too. This desperation is fear-driven; the man is scared. And here's Jesus, this opportunity for healing he had no hope of finding—so his desperation breaks through.

Jesus heals him, and gives him “doctor's orders”—don't tell anyone. Just do what the Law of Moses requires in these cases: show yourself to the priest who is to verify that you can return to your family and normal life. Offer the sacrifices the Law requires, as a way of saying “thank you” to God. But like so many people who don't do what the physician tells them, this fellow starts telling everyone about Jesus, and the healing Jesus gave him. He won't be the last to tell others about Jesus! The cured leper's joy—gladness—overcomes his intent to follow Jesus' orders. He can't seem to help himself. Emotion is driving his deeds.

Here in Auburn, the Journal carried a page one story today, “Cyclist with Cancer Finds Inspiration in Armstrong Foundation”. (Cyndi Litzko is just glad to be alive.) Gladness can drive our deeds.

Last case: the Apostle Paul, talking about himself. This passage is First Corinthians, chapter 9. I’m going to read the whole chapter, because the context seems important to me. Please, Lord, speak to Your people through Your Word! *[text]*

Paul knows that in his time—and now, as well—people will accuse preachers of just being in it for the money. So Paul made sure such a smear would never stick to him; he made tents and sold them so that he could be financially self-sufficient any time he needed to be. (We call that, “bi-vocational ministry” today.)

Paul’s life was clearly not driven by money; he gave away his ministry for free. Instead, he was driven by the joy of seeing the impact of God through the good news of Jesus he preached. He was driven by grateful joy at what God had done for him—turning his life around, totally—that Paul wanted to please God, more than anything. His life was driven by gladness.

What drives you? There’s not a single answer for that, for any of us. We have different emotions toward different people and different situations; we are complex.

But when we answer the question, “What drives you?” we tend to give a whole range of reasons why we do something. That’s not wrong, but when we ignore the emotional drivers, we prevent ourselves from exercising full control of our lives.

When we make plans for something important, we try to take into account all the possible contingencies, mistakes, opposing forces, and so on. But if emotions are such powerful drivers, we should take account of those, too—and that means, admitting that our emotions can have that great power. In a culture that values reason and will over emotions (especially for us men), it makes us feel vulnerable to even talk about how we feel. The poet Robert Bly was quoting someone else when he said, “You ask women how they feel, and they can look inside and see a whole play going on, with characters they know well. But if you ask men, when they look inside, they see shadowy figures moving around, whose names they do not know.” Not a bad image.

Clearly, emotions have an important place in Scripture; God Himself reveals emotions, and is not shy about it. But God also controls His emotions. God admits emotions and controls emotions—and that’s the key for us, too, who are made in God’s image. Rather than ignoring or denying our mad, sad, glad or scared feelings, we need to name them and claim them, and bring them before God.

Naming them and claiming them requires that we establish a distance in order to recognize and apply the correct label. Even a small objective distance provides us a safety margin, for the “us” that is naming the emotion is no longer driven so much. That distancing is the first step in taking control of our emotions, instead of our emotions taking control of us.

When we bring our emotions to God—the whole situation and its emotions, and lay it out before Him—we gain still greater distance. When we listen to God after we have unpacked our feelings, we get God’s view of the situation, and that can be very, very important. God knows in a way we often don’t. Taking this time with God allows God the opportunity to bring in other

factors we had not thought of, to add important input about His values and what HE might like to accomplish in this situation. Then, of course, we have a decision to make: will we bend this situation to His agenda, or will we bend it to ours? (These alternatives are not always opposites, but there is probably some point where “our agenda” would take a different path.)

Bringing our emotions before God does a number of good things. It honors our emotions, and brings them to our consciousness. We can't control what we do not know.

Second, it gives us important distance from the immediate drive of our feelings. John Bradshaw used to talk about our emotions as “e-motions”—“e” is for energy; emotions are “energy in motion”, driving us. Bringing them before God brings us distance and more safety in dealing with our feelings.

Third, bringing our emotions before God allows God to soothe, steel, and steer our emotions toward a goal God wants. We open more of our life to God, and God becomes more real and present to us. Our lives—our emotional lives and our deeds' drivers—become more God-ly. We will start looking more and more like Jesus, the very “spittin' image” of God.

But do you have the drive, the desire, to do that—to bring God into your life, to “decrease, that God may increase” (to paraphrase John the Baptist's words about Jesus)? If you don't have that desire now, do you at least have the desire to have that desire? Then bring THAT before God, and let God blow His Holy Spirit upon that little spark in you, so that it glows more brightly, and begins to warm your heart. Then God's warmth becomes the driver of your life, and out of joy—gladness—you want to bend all of life toward Him.

To God be the glory!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on February 15, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]