

I'm so honored to be appointed here as your new pastor. From what I've experienced so far, though you've had some ups and downs - as all churches do - I perceive a vibrancy and presence of the Holy Spirit in this body of believers that I'm positive will catapult us into the future as missionaries for Christ in this community and far beyond.

Is it just me, or are conversations & interactions still a little difficult in this kinda, maybe, sorta post pandemic time? As you know, my family and I just moved here from San Diego. In preparation for our move we were offered boxes by people in our neighborhood - friends of a friend so we didn't know them. I walked up to their house a few weeks ago, with my mask on to be polite and safe and rang the doorbell. When they opened the door, they weren't wearing masks, but they saw I was wearing mine so they began to look around for theirs. Trying to reduce their anxiety I said, "Please don't worry about masks. I'm wearing mine to be polite, but I don't mind if you don't wear them." Then they say "Okay, we're double vaccinated anyway so come on in and we'll get the boxes." And I said "I'm double vaccinated too," as I walked in the house. Even though we've never met and we don't know ANYTHING else about each other, we already know part of each other's medical history. What a way to start building a relationship!

And re-building established relationships now is a whole other experience, right? My family of origin, my three older brothers, Mom & Dad and I have been having family zoom meetings every Saturday for almost a year now. I've talked to them more in the past year than I ever have. But I can't help but wonder what is it going to be like when we're finally in the same room again - which we haven't been yet. Are we gonna begin talking over each other by accident then both stop and wait then both say "You go ahead" at the same time like we do every week on Zoom? Are we going to feel awkward sharing the same space again?

And, I see people who know each other sharing hugs now, but shaking someone's hand upon them the first time - should we still do that? Elbows and fist pumps are good for established relationships, but I still feel kinda awkward doing that for a first meeting, though I have seen some people do it well.

For some of us, building and maintaining relationships comes fairly easy, but I think this re-entering phase is stumping us all a little. And for those of us who struggled with good relationships even before all this, my hope is this sermon series over the next three weeks, called "Rebuilding Relationships" will help us all examine and reinvent healthier relationships - new and old.

I've been thinking about and studying healthy relationships for the past 15 years. I've come to understand that, whether we like it or not, we live in what's called an EMOTIONAL SYSTEM. We are not alone - spiritually or on this earth.

What I mean is, when we interact with each other, it's not a linear experience. Person A to person B to person C in a line. Relationships are not a linear experience. Instead it's systemic. Our behavior mutually influences those around us in a system. One person responds to someone, who responds to another, who responds to the first, who has already responded to others - and we build this web. This happens in all forms of communication, not just those we're in the same space with. It's a system.

Living in a systemic experience, instead of a linear one, is a little like how gravity works on our planets. Each planet does not operate independently or in a linear fashion. Instead, the particular mass and make up of each individual planet contributes to a gravitational field that regulates the path of every other planet. It's a beautifully balanced system.

Also - like it or not - every human is an emotive being. None of us are completely without emotion. You might not cry at the movies, I'm sure once in a while you do get angry or sad. We are emotive, emotional, beings. Just like many living creatures, we have this lower part of the brain called the amygdala, which receives input from different receptors in our body - smell, hearing, touch, etc which then cause the amygdala to send out signals to release stress hormones which prepare our bodies to fight or take flight. For example, for me, due to a little PTSD from wildfires near our home years ago, when I smell any type of smoke, my first emotional reaction is to run. I don't control it. It's just automatically innate and it's my first reaction. The amygdala plays a strong role in emotions.

Emotions are not the same as feelings, at least in systems thinking. Emotions are anything that is instinctive, automatic, reactive, mindless and defensive. And about 90 percent of our behavior is based on emotions. Emotion is that which has no premeditation. It's deeply innate.

For example - Dr. Dan Papero, a therapist with Bowen Center, says that in every marriage there is "The" conversation. All he has to say is A and his wife will say B or vice versa. For instance, one spouse might say, "You're not listening to me." And automatically, instinctively, defensively the other spouse will say, "Yes I am." And with a little more volume and emphasis, the first spouse will say... "No you're not." then the second spouse with equal volume and intensity will say .... "Yes I am!"

Some of you know this conversation very well!

Why doesn't the second spouse say, with maturity, "I'm not listening to you, but I would like to hear what you have to say." Well, that old amygdala gets in the way of the frontal cortex where we do our mature thinking and our emotions take over.

Just to be clear once more, emotion is that which is instinctive, automatic, reactive, mindless or defensive - at least in systems thinking.

Feelings - which are part of, but not equal to emotions - feelings are, in a sense, the outcome of our emotions. People can be aware of feelings by feeling them. Our automatic reactions cause us to feel - afraid, angry, sad. Our feelings are part of being emotional creatures. We live in an emotional system.

When I think of emotional systems and being a follower of Christ, one of the scenes that comes to mind from the Bible is that most important last night Jesus had with his disciples before he's taken away to be crucified. More specifically the story as told in the gospel of John.

One of the things you'll learn about me is that I think bringing your own Bible to worship, or having a Bible app ready, or even picking up a Bible in the back and finding and reading the words for yourself is a fabulous and important practice. So next week when you come to worship. Please, go ahead and bring your Bible or have your Bible app ready so you can read the words also.

Thank you to Steve for reading the first part of the scripture lesson for us today from John 13:18-30.

I'm going to continue and finish the story by reading John 18:1-11. Please open & read with me.

I don't know about you, but many thoughts and images filled my mind as I read & heard these passages. A couple of things stood out for me as I studied this past week. First - and probably most important, that Jesus, God in the flesh, was present with the disciples eating a meal with them- a very important meal. The fact that they were eating a meal together is truly significant. God loved them, and us, so much that God took on human form and reclined at table and broke bread with them, which is a pretty intimate experience, especially in light of this past year, right?. How many meals did we eat this past year either by ourselves or with our immediate family only? Sharing a meal has always been a sign of building relationship - even more so now I think.

My son, Drew, flew home from college in Colorado just before we moved here. He'd been away since January. Though the four of us - myself, my husband, son and daughter - had talked and saw each other the first few days after he got back, we were unable to make time to share a meal all four of us together until a week later. And I felt the need for that experience, that important way to re-connect. So I scheduled a family dinner with everyone and oh was it good to sit together, relaxing over a good meal and check in with each other once again.

Since the beginning of humanity, according to scripture, God has never left us alone. In one form or another, either Creator, Christ or Holy Spirit, God has been present with us in extremely significant ways. Even as we break bread together. We are not alone.

In these passages in John, I also noticed right away the emotional system among the disciples. We especially see the system at work in verses 22-25, which actually made me laugh. I said earlier that our behavior mutually influences those around us in a system, kind of a web. One person responds to another, who responds to another, who responds to the first, who has already responded to the responses of others and so on. We see that happening in this story.

Jesus makes a statement - "I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me." - which causes the disciples to "stare at one another at a loss to understand." And what happens next, did you catch it? Though they are all reclining at the table (which is how they ate in

those days) and sitting together in the same place, Peter motions to John and tells John to ask Jesus “Which one of us does he mean?” So John asks Peter’s question of Jesus. How often do we do that in our own systems? We don’t want to ask the question or make the statement directly, so we get someone else to do it for us. There’s another important aspect about relationships and emotional systems in these passages connected to my title “We are not alone”. Though we do experience times of not having other people in the same space - the reality is, even then we are not truly alone. Cell phones, social media, the internet and streaming services make sure we do not feel alone. In that sense, we are constantly connected in emotional systems which inevitably bring conflict and anxiety.

Just like emotion, anxiety is automatic and for most of it is beyond our awareness until it manifests in some way. Next week I’m going to talk about how to be less anxious as we rebuild relationships and in the third sermon I’ll explore the most common ways we manifest anxiety so we can be aware of them and choose other options as we rebuild relationships.

For today as I wrap up, let me say that there are two types of anxiety we experience most commonly in our emotional systems - acute anxiety and chronic anxiety.

Acute anxiety is something we all experience some times in life - when an accident occurs, or we become ill, or we experience a change in our employment .... feeling anxious at these times is an acute experience, for a certain length of time. In these situations, though we might react harshly instead of responding thoughtfully, it’s possible to be thinking persons and adapt to the situation with some maturity.

I’d categorize the situation in John chapter 18 - when Judas, a detachment of soldiers and other officials descend upon Jesus - I’d categorize that as an experience of acute anxiety in that emotional system. Unfortunately, in that experience, Peter does react harshly and draws his sword and cuts off the high priest’s right ear. Jesus, of course, is thinking with maturity the whole time and commands Peter to put away his sword and makes another statement that he must “drink the cup the Father has given to him.” In this way also, may Jesus be our example and guide. When acute situations arise and we feel anxious, may we somehow understand and act in

ways that bring God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven - instead of reacting harshly without thinking first.

Chronic anxiety, on the other hand, stems mainly from the emotional system we were brought up with in our families. Chronic anxiety is not time-limited, it’s very difficult to respond to with maturity, it’s fear based and it’s Chronic - repeats itself over and over. In this experience, even a minor incident causes an imbalance in the emotional system and there is disproportionate reactivity. Many times the incident isn’t addressed successfully so balance isn’t restored, it just goes underground until the next minor trigger.

Edwin Friedman, a rabbi and family therapist wrote this in his book A Failure of Nerve, “The distinction between acute and chronic anxiety has major ramifications for the functioning and being of leaders and all people. For there is no way out of a chronic condition unless one is willing to go through an acute, temporarily more painful, phase.”

Next week, I’ll talk about that phase - different aspects of it - which will help us reduce anxiety as we continue to rebuild relationships. Next week is the sermon “It begins with me.”