

Children’s Moment “Little and Big” - *Healthy Living*

Good morning, girls and boys. We’re continuing with our “Little and Big” lessons. Today, I want to talk about wishing and doing.

Mr. Rogers said, “To me, what makes someone successful is a healthy combination of wishing and doing. Wishing doesn’t make anything happen, but it can be the start of some important [things].”¹

Adults talk about having goals all the time. Some are related what your parents do at work. Some are related to what you do at church. Some are related to what you do at home. For example, you may have chores you’re responsible for doing. Wishing a chore is done isn’t the same thing as doing it. I’ll bet you all have to clean up your toys or school work when you’re done. That’s a goal.

Have you ever seen your parents’ “To Do” list? That’s a list of ALL the things they think they need to do. The problem is everyone’s busy, tired and frustrated, so things don’t get done.

What happens then? The things you didn’t finish get added to the list making it longer and longer and longer. You start to worry about it. It seems like you can’t ever rest or have fun.

What can you do? I’ve learned to take baby steps. Little steps can lead to big changes. Picking up one thing and putting it away doesn’t clean your room, but it does help. You’re doing something your parents like and you’ll have more room to play.

Mr. Rogers said, “You can make believe it happens … but the make-believe just won’t do it for you.” It takes time to learn how to ride a bike or sing a song or dance like a ballerina. Sometimes we can feel like our small steps don’t make a difference, but they do.

Don’t be afraid of seeming silly, awkward or less than perfect! Everyone can learn new things. We all start off the same way – we look funny. But the joy when you do a new thing is wonderful. Learning doesn’t happen by magic but practicing something you love will make you feel good and bring a smile to someone’s face.

Let’s pray ... God, give me the strength and the grace to turn my wishing into do as we follow in your footsteps. In Jesus’ name, amen.

¹ <https://www.fredrogerscenter.org/2016/01/a-little-and-big-start-to-the-new-year/>

Message: “Emotional Health”
“A Message of Hope”

How do you feel today? We hear the question all the time. The typical response is “fine” or “okay.” Rarely do we hear what the other person is feeling; their emotional state. And, rarely, do we want to hear someone else’s emotional state. I think that’s sad as it means we may have a lot of acquaintances, but few relationships where we can openly share what’s weighing on our soul.

It’s hard to have empathy for another person when we’re dealing with despair and trauma ourselves. We’re struggling to cope with our own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual challenges.

We’ve all been wounded by what’s going on – the pandemic, economic problems, the polarization of our culture, a heated political battle, racism and injustice, unrest and more. And that’s not counting the cost of the things happening to us in our every day lives: death, separation, divorce, addiction, abuse, illness, accidents and the stress and strain of trying to make ends meet while caring for your family.

How are you feeling? If you’re like many people, you’re socially isolated, stressed, tired, anxious, depressed and fearful. I have news: the feelings and emotions you’re experiencing are normal. There’s nothing wrong with being sad or joyful or anything in between. Solomon wrote, *“For everything there is a season ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance”* (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4).

We’ve been talking about healthy ways to cope with trauma for the past two weeks. We started with the current state of trauma in America, recognizing grief affects all aspects of our being. I spoke about our physical health two weeks ago and Annilia spoke about mental health last week.

This week, we’re going to spend some time reflecting on our emotional health. Don’t be afraid to show your emotions. After all, God gave them to us.

There's nothing wrong with shedding tears. The shortest verse in the Bible says this, “*Jesus wept*” (John 11:35). Jesus cried when he was standing in front of the tomb of Lazarus, one of his best friends. There was no shame or guilt. It was a heartfelt, natural emotion. Jesus was called “*the man of sorrows*” (Isaiah 53:1-3). He certainly understands grief, sadness and rejection.

There's also nothing wrong with laughter. One verse I wish was in scripture is this, “Jesus laughed.” Some you may have seen this picture in my office. It was given to me by a dear sister in Christ several years ago. Some people see Jesus as a solemn, serious person. I believe that misses the mark.

Jesus was a well-rounded, healthy human being. He loved being around children (Matthew 19:14). Jesus had a sense of humor. After all, who doesn't smile when you imagine a camel going through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24)? Jesus encouraged laughter in his sermons and told parables that ended with rejoicing (Luke 15). At times, Jesus was even accused of being too joyful (Luke 7:34).

Being in an authentic relationship with another person means sharing our experiences: the good times and bad times, laughter and tears, joys and concerns. One time, there were two couples having dinner in a restaurant. One of the couples were newlyweds. They sat together, looked into each other's eyes and spent the evening in conversation. The other couple were much older; they had been together for several decades. They, too, sat together. They looked into each other's eyes, touched each other, but sat together in silence.

The young couple noticed the older couple. The young husband said, “Isn't it so sad; they have so little to talk about?” The young bride said, “Isn't it so marvelous; they can communicate so much without speaking.”

When you are emotionally available and connected with another person, conversation is unnecessary. Some of the most powerful moments in my life and ministry were just sitting quietly with a person, letting them know I was feeling the same as they were. I know you have the same experiences.

Those moments are God-moments. God’s Spirit connects us to God and other people at a deep., spiritual level. We’re connected so deeply language has no meaning. Paul put it this way, “*the moment we get tired ... waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. [The Spirit] does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. [The Spirit] knows us far better than we know ourselves, ... and keeps us present before God. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good*” (Romans 8:26-28, MSG).

Being in touch with your emotions and emotionally available to others is one of the ways we care for others. We’re living as God’s children, made holy by the presence God in our lives and the lives of others. Tuning out our emotions or desensitizing ourselves to them is like taking two strings away from a six-string guitar. Our life becomes filled with discord, rather than harmony.

You may not realize it, but feeling is part of our Wesleyan DNA. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, famously describes his Aldersgate experience in his journal entry from May 24, 1738, “*In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading [Martin] Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*”²

It may sound like this God-moment happened unexpectedly. There are certainly times when that happens. However, more often than not, these special encounters with the Holy Spirit come to those who are seeking, those who have opened their hearts to receive something special from God.

² <https://www.umc.org/en/content/holy-spirit-moments-learning-from-wesley-at-aldersgate>

Wesley’s account resonates strongly with me. I was raised in a denomination that believes God is the one who makes the choice. You just go along with it. After more than 20 years away from the church, I found my way back. God worked through my wife Esperanza to bring me to the United Methodist Church. And, for the first time, my heart was strangely warmed. I felt like God invited me to choose. My feelings weren’t ignored. God wanted me to come and be part of our gathering exactly as I was. I don’t know about you, but that changed me. It gives me passion for each day to this day.

How do you feel? If you’re watching this online or reading it, you’re making the choice to do so. There’s something deep down that’s drawing you this God-moment. If you’re like me and everyone else gathered, we have a story to tell about how our hearts feel. God knows your story. We want to hear your story. I invite you to connect to a person or group and share your story. You will make our lives better and, in turn, your life will be made better when you hear our stories.

Dr. Chan Hellman shares his story, “After I finished my PhD work in quantitative psychology, I [began] training … people pursuing a license in professional counseling.

During this time, I met a young man - just turned 19 - who had recently been diagnosed with HIV and was also newly homeless. Yet he wasn’t depressed, anxious, fearful or socially isolated. He was very engaged.

He introduced me to the concept of hope. He didn’t use that word specifically, but he was talking about his goals of going to college and identifying very specific pathways to achieve that goal.

That really struck me. All of my work on hope is in the context of despair and trauma. I come from a background of high trauma myself. I was homeless from seventh grade through high school.

A big part of my research also has to do with me trying to figure out my own journey. For example, why am I resilient but my sibling really struggles? From my perspective, it’s hope. I’m completely convinced that hope is a social gift.

I am convinced that hope does not operate in isolation. Hope is something that is built upon relationships. Through this, we overcome the guilt and shame of our own experience. ... I think hope is ... a way of thinking I think that our conviction in religion or spirituality is the moral compass that guides our hope.

We've seen that with people who have a high level of trauma, nurturing their hope helps buffer their adversity and stress. For instance, we found that among pediatricians who work with abused children, the connection between compassion fatigue and burnout disappears in the presence of hope.

Another example we found is parents who go through programming to be reunified with their children. Those with higher hope actually complete programming faster and at a higher rate of success than lower hope parents.³ Dr. Hellman wrestles with his understanding of the source of hope.

Does hope come from our heart or head or from outside of us?

He thinks there is a connection between spirituality and hope.
I wholeheartedly agree and know many of you do as well.

“Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see”
(Hebrew 11:1).

Where do you start? We are better when we are connected together with each other and with God. We learn through relationships. When children or others realize they can safely express their emotions with you, it has great benefits. A bond is formed. There's greater trust. There's a sense of security and safety. We feel accepted for who we are. These early, formative relationships shape and form the relationships we seek out later in life.

The nature of your relationships matters. Some of our relationships are healthy – they feed our emotional health in a positive way. Other relationships are unhealthy – they draw from our emotional health in a negative way. Some people fill our buckets; others drain them.

³ *Trauma in America, Barna Group, 2020, p. 46*

One of the potential downsides to close relationships is our dependence on the other person. You've all heard the term co-dependency. We all have some degree of co-dependency. That comes with being in a relationship. But there are times when our emotions get out of control, when we can become too dependent on another person's emotional or mental state. When that happens, we need to use our emotional intelligence to step back.

Dr. Edwin Friedman, a famous psychologist, said, “The most important attribute of a leader is not knowledge or technique but what the leader brings in his/her presence. And the presence she/he needs is a non-anxious presence.”⁴

You are a leader. You are part of a relationship with another person. You are part of a household. You are a model for children and others in our community. Your life is a witness to your faith in Jesus. You may not realize what I'm telling you, but it's true. This isn't something you can avoid. It's also something you shouldn't be anxious about. It's the nature of our life.

What you can choose to do is to be present, emotionally available, to others in a non-anxious way. What that means is you let things go. 95% of the time the things people say and do are focused on themselves and their own interests. You can't control them (nor should you try to). The only person you can control is yourself. And the best thing you can do is admit it, be honest with yourself and God, and then forgive yourself and others. When you do that, you'll find the peace of Christ. That's the secret to emotional health and contentment.

“Somebody who has a deep faith tends to have both internal and external resources, or pathways, to help them deal with stress. When we're facing adversity or trauma, it's the capacity to lean into one another that gives us hope. A deep robust faith in Jesus is what we need to endure at a different level because we know things will get better.”⁵

How are you feeling today? Reach out to someone. You'll feel better.

⁴ Dr. Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leader in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Seabury Books, 2007

⁵ Ibid, p. 47

Hebrews 4:11-16 (CEB)

Therefore, let’s make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following the same example of disobedience, because God’s word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It’s able to judge the heart’s thoughts and intentions. No creature is hidden from it, but rather everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of the one to whom we have to give an answer.

Also, let’s hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God’s Son; because we don’t have a high priest who can’t sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin.

Finally, let’s draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

Romans 16:17-19 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to watch out for people who create divisions and problems against the teaching that you learned. Keep away from them. People like that aren’t serving the Lord. They are serving their own feelings. They deceive the hearts of innocent people with smooth talk and flattery. The news of your obedience has reached everybody, so I’m happy for you. But I want you to be wise about what’s good, and innocent about what’s evil.