

Proper 9 YA
Keating Series Part 4
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Afflictive Emotions
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There was a man who went on a retreat and learned the methods of Christian meditation called centering prayer. He spent the whole weekend praying with others in silence and felt a peace and serenity that he didn't know was possible. High on this peace and serenity, he resolved to keep it by practicing the virtues of patience and forbearance when he got back home.

He gets home and immediately upon opening the door, his irate wife shoves their bawling 2-year old into his arms and goes to their bedroom and shuts the door. She didn't even say hello. He's affronted, but decides to feel bad that his wife is so upset. He takes a breath and takes this opportunity to soothe the child and the child calms down. He relishes this bonding time and pats himself on the back for "surrendering to the moment of affliction." While the child sleeps, he puts away the dishes. He notices his favorite knife, the one he told his wife could not go in the dishwasher, was clearly subjected to its inhospitable environment. He takes a breath and decides to forgive his wife. He hears his wife open the bedroom door; he looks brightly at her. But she yells, "I don't have the energy to have dinner with your parents tonight!" And she slams the door and retreats back into the bedroom. This is the third time she's canceled plans with his folks and they were beginning to murmur. Plus, he was so excited to tell them about the retreat and his resolution to practice patience. He felt himself feeling a spike of anger. "Why is everyone ruining my plan to be patient!" He takes a breath. When he opens his eyes, he sees the dog has chewed up his running shoes, the cat's litter box needs cleaning, the garbage is full, and his wife's craft projects are everywhere. (Oh, she had time to craft, but not clean!). Breath, breath, breath. Finally, he gets a text

from his boss saying, “While you’ve been dilly dallying at your retreat, we’ve had to cover for your mistakes. Get to the office now!” He screamed, “Argh! Everything is making it so hard for me to stay enlightened!” And he punches the wall and the child awakes, screaming.

“I do the thing I do not want to do, but I can’t do the thing that I want to do!” laments the Apostle Paul in the epistle to the Roman, this man, and all of humankind. This is because underneath our intentions is a whole landscape of programming we started building since the moment we were born. These programs are really what’s calling the shots. (You can read about how these were derived in my last set of sermons in this series.) Thomas Keating would say it isn’t our intentions that need revising, but it is our emotional programs. I believe this is what Paul calls the “law of sin,” which holds us captive to fantasies that don’t make us ultimately happy. He would say to our man, “The problem is not your wife, your kid, your parents, your dog or cat; it is certainly not the wall. The problem is within you.”

Today, I want to talk about afflictive emotions. These emotions are basically these: anger/rage, lust/greed/jealousy, fear/anxiety, sadness/grief, and pride/shame. I also want to talk about the commentaries we make when we feel these emotions. Finally, we will consider how to make the choice to release ourselves from their grip—which is really to release our grip on the afflictive emotion and thought—and so consent to our own agency and God’s transformative grace. Eventually, the practice of releasing allows us to become aware of our programming and to see them for what they really are—a value system that we have imposed on the world, a value system we expect other people to satisfy before we are happy.

Let’s return to our man’s story. At each spot of discontent, our man was visited by an afflictive emotion. If you follow the trail of an afflictive emotion, you will always find that it is tied to a program for happiness. In fact, each program for happiness is connected to another program, like interlocking wheels in a clock. The turning of one begins to turn the other. The wheels further down the chain are our primal programs for happiness. We have the least awareness of these programs because they are obfuscated by the

other more “sophisticated” programs. That is why we can be an adult, but behave like a 2-year old when something goes wrong, throwing tantrums and demanding the world submit to our wishes. Unfortunately, when we are older, we can do real harm to ourselves and others. Our man broke his fingers, scared his wife, child, dog, and cat, and now they have to repair the wall.

As afflictive emotions work with our programs for happiness, we churn out afflictive thoughts. These are the commentaries we draw based on afflictive emotions—we blame, we judge; we “should” others and ourselves; the intensity can grow in violence of language and action; the commentaries can lead us to cut off relationships with others and ourselves. Afflictive thoughts are great at deceiving us because we think we are being so smart and rational. For example, our man’s commentaries can escalate like this: “So, my wife has time to craft, but not clean. She has her priorities mixed up. And she knew how much I needed this retreat. I see that she just couldn’t give me a break. I work so hard and she doesn’t appreciate me. No one really appreciates me. Yeah, my parents and wife can’t seem to see that their tension is a drain on me. My parents are supposed to support me, but they drag me under the weight of their needs. Come to think of it, they are all so selfish. It’s been the case for all my life. Even this screaming baby is selfish! All my life no one has cared about me! I’m leaving this family!”

The thing about our afflictive emotions, if we let them, is they are our best teachers of self-awareness. They tell us what our actual value system is rather than what we wish them to be or wish to present to others. When we can see the truth, we can begin to consent to God, who is the only one able to dismantle these programs in God’s pure love. We can experience the freedom from that cycle that the Apostle Paul laments in his letter to the Romans—we can be freed from the law of sin.

So, the next time you encounter an afflictive emotion, ask the question, “What is this afflictive emotion telling me about what I think I need? Can I be okay without this program for happiness?”

It isn't easy to be a student of afflictive emotions. It's hard to calm down when our bodies are flowing with flight/flight/freeze chemicals. This is why it is important to practice a meditation practice like centering prayer. This type of discursive prayer replenishes the well of interior silence and gives us new habits of consent and release. Next week, we will learn about what we are actually doing in centering prayer that aids in our ability to release ourselves from our grip on afflictive emotions and thoughts.

The programs are within us, but so is the Kingdom. In fact, when we go deep within, we will find that these programs are false promises and we don't need them. Hidden, as if in secret, but really an open invitation, is the one who says, "Come unto me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls." In the ancient days, the mantle that a teacher wore (symbolized by the priest stole) was called a yoke. Compared to the yoke of oxen, Jesus teaches that his yoke of teaching is light. It is going deep into his teaching of the Kingdom within that you will find release from the burdens on your soul. So, let us go take on this yoke and go within.

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Glossary:

Anger (reaction to things hard to obtain or evil that is hard to avoid)

Apathy (boredom/bitterness, withdrawal from life; the shrug or dismissal)

Lust/Greed/Jealousy (overweening desire for pleasure to compensate for an affront)

Pride/Shame (self-inflation/self rejection in response to a disturbance in self-image)

Sadness/Grief

Fear/anxiety