

Psalm 42

BIG Feelings

June 30, 2019

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Play this video right after Scott's Gift of Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9E-I7yBwlc>

*Title Slide

What do you do with the mad that you feel? Or the sad that you feel?
Or the fear that you feel? Or the anxiety that you feel?

Feelings are part of being human, we all have them. One of the first jobs for parents is teaching children how to manage their BIG feelings. When my guys were little, I cannot tell you the number of times I said, to a little boy in tears or in full on, red-faced anger, "Use your words." You see, I wanted them to know that having feelings was part of who we are and that part of growing up is taking responsibility for controlling what we do with those feelings. Over the years, I've noticed whether intentionally or not, that it is typical for parents to teach their children to manage their feelings in the same way they manage their own feelings. Children watch what their parents do with their BIG feeling and they mimic them.

When I was young, my mom was a yeller and a door slammer. When she was angry, she expressed it by yelling and then stomping off to a room with a door and slamming it. As a teenager, much to my step dad's disappointment, I adopted that way of dealing with anger as well. When I was grounded (and I was grounded a lot), I ran off to my room and slammed the door. I remember, on one occasion, freshly grounded, I was headed down the hallway to slam my door when I heard my mom say, "If you slam that door, you can add another week to being

grounded.” What? What was I supposed to do with the mad that I felt if I couldn’t slam the door?

I remember feeling like a little girl, standing in my room, quietly making all kinds of angry gestures in the direction of my mom. I felt so frustrated, like I might explode. I needed that door slam! Who was she to tell me how I could be mad? After that, each time my mom slammed a door, I thought about the day I had been denied the door slam. And I grew to really, really hate that way of expressing anger. I made up my mind that I would never live in a house where voices were raised and doors were slammed. Somewhere along the line, I decided showing anger was bad and dangerous, so when I was really angry, rather than making a lot of noise, I would get very quiet. I would retreat to my room and brood, refusing to talk to anyone for hours, sometimes days.

And I will admit, there are times, even now, when I am tempted to deal with my own BIG feelings by “taking my toys and going home,” by isolating myself, hoping if I ignore the feelings, they will go away. We can’t hide from our feelings, though, and the world needs us to have BIG feelings that cause us to act. Right now, I am having a lot of BIG feelings about the ways in which our country treats immigrants and refugees. And I think we ought to have BIG feelings about the news that very soon, 3 ½ hours southwest of here, there will be as many as 1400 children imprisoned, without their parents or a real plan. We ought to be furious when we hear about the conditions that have been reported in other facilities that are holding migrant children. And our BIG feelings should be causing us to call our senators and representatives, both in Washington and Oklahoma, it should be inspiring us to read every verse in the Bible that talks about how we are to treat the “widow, orphan, and stranger.” We should be mad as hell and I am.

That’s the subject of my BIG feelings.
What do you have BIG feelings about?

So, what do we do with the mad, sad, fear that we feel? In Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, feelings, even anger, were recognized and affirmed, talked about and played about. It was okay to be mad or sad or jealous or afraid or joyful or excited. It was okay to feel any way, but what mattered most was how those feelings were expressed.

(Story about Mister Rogers and the piano)

Mister Rogers encouraged us to talk about our feelings, to find constructive ways to express them and to grow into people who could control our impulse to hurt others when we feel hurt. He wrote, "Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we're not alone."

Who can we trust with our BIG feelings? Our faith teaches us that first and foremost, we can trust God. Yet, often, we hesitate to really tell God what is on our minds. We don't want to upset, bother, or disappoint God. And we certainly don't want to seem disrespectful, right? But really, God is bigger than even our biggest feelings. The psalmists understood that. "The language of the Psalter is as immediate, robust, and frank as the people from whom it emerged. It has this character because it is a language that reflects a faith relationship with a real and living God. This is a people and a God whose relationship with one another is in process, not complete, continuing to evolve and grow, in constant need of a new perspective. The Psalter is a vibrant form of prayer because it won't stay still. It demands of the one who prays a constant openness to what is new, receptivity to the surprising and the unexpected."

(Kelly, Timothy, *Weavings: Woven Together in Love*, "A Book Review of Praying the Psalms by Walter Brueggemann," September/October 1991, p.43)

As we read the psalms, we seek to have that same kind of openness to God, ourselves, and the world around us. Today's text is Psalm 42. I realized after I chose this psalm, and after the bulletins were printed, that I preached on this psalm almost exactly a year ago. I almost changed the text, after all, the Psalter is literally full of psalms that deal with BIG feelings. There are so many other choices. But I love how the psalmist, in just 11 verses, communicates deep despair *and* sure hope, dark isolation *and* pure joy. That is what life is like, right?

*There are red days and blue days and gray days and brown days. And a whole lot of "mixed up days."

(reference to *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss, used for the children's sermon)

This psalm reminds us that our messiness does not surprise or offend God.

*I am reading from a paraphrase of Psalm 42, written by Unitarian Universalist minister Christine Robinson.

As a deer longs for flowing streams
so my soul longs for you, O God
My soul thirsts for you. When will I feel
that I can stand before you again?
Once I came before you easily and often.
Now-now I feel disquieted and lost.
I remember being glad to worship.
I remember leading others into your house
with praise and thanksgiving.
But now my soul is heavy within me.
I say to God, "Have you forgotten me?
I feel like a mockery of myself. Are you there?"
Why are you so disquieted, O my soul?
Deep calls to deep in the heart of the world.
The creative energy of the universe

throbs to those who listen.
Put your trust there. You will not be forsaken.

Scholars suggest this psalm was probably written during the Babylonian exile when God's people were forced to figure out what they thought about God now that they were expelled from their homes, from the land God gave them and without a temple in which God could reside. The psalmist remembers with fondness what it was like to go to the temple to worship and he longs to experience God's presence and that sense of community again, "I feel lost. Have you forgotten me, God?" he says. Feeling lost and alone are really BIG feelings and the psalmist had no trouble simultaneously blaming God and finding hope in God.

*I was thinking about this last Sunday as John and I saw one of my favorite musicals, "Fiddler on the Roof." It's a story of a Jewish community set in pre-revolutionary Russia and focuses on Tevye, the father of five daughters, and his attempts to maintain Jewish religious and cultural traditions in times that were rapidly changing. Throughout the show, the audience has a window into Tevye's relationship with God, as we hear him talking to God. Here is what he said about his horse's injury:

*Dear God-
Was that necessary?
Did you have to make him lame just before the Sabbath?
That wasn't nice.
It's enough you pick on me.
Bless me with five daughters, a life of poverty, that's all right.
But what have you got against my horse?
Really, sometimes I think,
when things are too quiet up there,
you say to yourself,
"Let's see. "*

"What kind of mischief can I play on my friend, Tevye? "

This is what he said to God about money:

*Well, I'm not really complaining.
After all, with your help,
I'm starving to death.
Oh, dear Lord!
You made many, many poor people.
I realize, of course,
it's no shame to be poor.
But it's no great honor either.
So what would have been so terrible
if I had a small fortune.
If I were a rich man.*

There is something so warm and familiar about Tevye's relationship with God, about his ability to say what's on his mind, even to the point of teasing God. God created human beings with our messy feelings and it is up to us to figure out how to manage them. Both the wisdom of Mister Rogers and the wisdom of the psalms tell us that we have to talk about our feelings, with God and with each other. BIG feelings, our own and those of other people, scare some of us though. Because of that, we often sweep the BIG feelings we decide are bad feelings, aside. "I shouldn't be angry about that." "It's silly to be hurt by what she said." "Good Christians aren't supposed to get mad."

The problem with that way of thinking is that those feelings eventually come out. And my experience is that they usually come out at a really bad time. Instead of telling God how we feel and seeking wisdom or instead of talking to the person who hurt us or a trusted friend, we bury our anger and hurt...until the last straw. You know the last straw...it also broke the camel's back. It is that thing...that thing that by itself is

not a big deal, but when added to all the other times that situation or person has caused BIG feelings to rise up in us, ends in words we can never take back, actions we can never change, relationships that are too painful to repair.

So, what do we do with the mad that we feel? Find a way healthy way to express it. Perhaps we talk about it or write about it to God first. Maybe we paraphrase a psalm or write a song or prayer. Maybe we play the piano or go for a walk, pet a dog, or knit a sweater. And then we should take the advice in Psalm 46 and “be still “and listen. When we have mastered our own feelings, then we can talk to the person who hurt us. It sounds elementary, right? I mean...Mister Rogers was talking to small children when he talked about the importance of recognizing how we feel and controlling our actions.

And it is an important lesson to learn. We cannot control BIG feelings to the extent that we all have them. But we can control how we react. Healthy relationships in our homes, our workplaces, our church, and beyond require us to be honest about our feelings and talk about them, always seeking ways to repair brokenness. We cannot bring wholeness to a fragmented world if we hurt people in the process. I cannot use my anger at this country’s treatment of immigrants to hurt people who disagree with me. I can use my vote, my voice, my actions and my influence to bring about change, but acting in ways that diminish other human beings, treating them as less than the children of God they are, is not an option.

When I have been tempted to do that, I have found psalms helpful. Walter Brueggemann wrote a book years ago called *Praying the Psalms*. In it, he wrote, “The Psalms explore the full gamut of human experience from rage to hope.” We feel rage, the psalms express rage. We want revenge, the psalms talk about seeking revenge. What place can *these* BIG feelings have in the prayers of we who are taught to love our

neighbors? Brueggemann writes that presenting to God our rage, our desire for vengeance, even our feelings of hatred, is an act of faithfulness. Being honest with ourselves and with God about how we really feel, trusting that God gets it and loves us anyway is the stuff a real relationship is made of. God's compassion for us, as we experience BIG feelings, is God shouldering our pain so that we can grow in compassion for ourselves and others. So, maybe make a deal with yourself. You can say anything you want to God, but then you have to go and be compassionate and loving while you change the world.

I will end with these words from Mister Rogers:

*"Confronting our feelings and giving them appropriate expression always takes strength, not weakness.

*It takes strength to acknowledge our anger, and sometimes more strength yet to curb the aggressive urges anger may bring and to channel them into nonviolent outlets.

*It takes strength to face our sadness and to grieve and to let our grief and our anger flow in tears when they need to.

*It takes strength to talk about our feelings and to reach out for help and comfort when we need it."

May our BIG feelings inspire us to seek authentic relationships, with God and with one another. Amen.