

“Interior Examination”

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Psalm 139

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I have an anger problem. If you know me at all, I'm guessing that surprises you. (My husband says, if you know me really well, it won't!) It should surprise you because I almost never express anger — and that's my problem. I don't like anger. Why am I like this?

It likely goes back to my childhood. I suspect my Dad had the same anger problem I have. My Dad almost never expressed anger either. My Mom, on the other hand, could lose it with the best of them when we were younger. I suspect that as a child I interpreted my father's lack of anger as being in control of ugly emotions and my mother as having less control. My parents were opposites in so many ways ... yet they had a wonderful marriage and relationship.

It was only in counselling 5-ish years ago with Joan Stinson that I began to realize that my way of dealing with anger was not healthy. I can remember talking to her about situations and her saying to me something like: “You have a lot of anger and we should talk about that.” I remember thinking ‘What are you talking about? I don't have anger... What about what I just said demonstrated any anger?’

In fact, as I told her about situations that were bothering me, I likely joked about them and smiled all the way through. But Joan is a good enough counsellor not to be deceived by my happy walls of defense. I honestly had no clue that there was anger inside me, but she was totally right. One of the things she advised me to do was to practice being aware of when I am angry and to say out loud, to myself, “I am angry!”

Some of you who lean more towards the explosive anger issues might wonder why this is such a bad thing. The problem is that our reactions to situations and emotions don't just magically disappear. People like me can suppress and compartmentalize their strong feelings, but they don't go away. In my case they resurface in anxiety and in controlling and perfection tendencies. For others they may turn to depression, and of course for others they explode out in unrelated situations.

This is our third Sunday in Lent and today we are talking about the value of Interior Examination. We are reading a book by Rich Villodas called *The Deeply Formed Life* and this is the third value that Rich talks about.

The first week of our series focused on the Contemplative Life, and we took away that we need to **listen deeply to God**. Last week we spoke about the value of Racial Reconciliation and learned how important it is for us **listen deeply to others** and their experience. This week we learn how important it is to **listen deeply to ourselves** and our interior life. God wants us to be healthy and whole in mind, body and spirit.

All of us were raised by imperfect parents, taught by imperfect teachers, in imperfect school systems, in an imperfect world. Part of being a Christian is a willingness to grow and become more and more like Jesus. We often say around here *“God loves you just the way you are, but he loves you too much to leave you there!”*

Becoming more aware of those skeletons in the closet and being open to working towards some emotional healing will give you freedom and it will make you a more loving person. Wouldn't it be nice if we could love ourselves and others the way that God loves us and others?

The first step is awareness and honesty. When we bump into an acquaintance on the street and they ask you “How are you?” how do you respond? “Fine!” If you've just had a brutal argument with a loved one that you are still processing and hamster-wheeling in your head; how do you respond then? “Fine”. Fair enough. You don't have to tell every acquaintance about your pain. But sometimes that's how we are with God. We think that we can only show our sweet Sunday-best side to God. The Psalms remind us not to do that, but to bring our whole self to God — the good, the bad and the angry.

We read Psalm 139 today but we could read all the Psalms for this theme. The Psalms are filled with raw and real emotions. They are honest. Many are attributed to King David, but whoever wrote them has a genuine relationship with God that hides nothing. The Psalms are filled with sentiments of joy and wonder and praise but also with searing grief, fear and anger. There are psalms that cry out to God; like when Jesus cries out from the cross using Psalm 29: “My God, my God — why have you forsaken me?”. Others are filled with lament which gives real voice to grief and loss. Anger too is shown in the Psalms.

Psalm 139 is my favourite passage of scripture. It speaks so well to the call to being known fully by God and a desire to know ourselves. *“O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.”* (Psalm 139:1-3.) God knows all about us and loves us. It ends with King David longing to know himself better:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 130:23-24)

I love that line because it comes right after a few verses that we almost never read:

“Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart;

test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139: 21-24)

Even as David expresses judgement and hatred for God’s enemies there is the recognition of uncertainty – maybe at times he himself is that very enemy of God. You know how they say when you point a finger at others there are three fingers pointing back at you? That’s what David intentionally does and that’s what we need to do as well, point fingers back to ourselves.

This week in the value of Interior Examination we need to practice deep listening to ourselves. (My husband) Alex and I had a minister friend out west, David Robertson, who would often say to Alex: “Go deep with that Alex!” It always struck us as a little funny. It sounded a little too “Peace, Love and Eternal Grooviness” to us. We were in our late 20’s, early 30’s and going deep wasn’t something we gave a lot of time to.

I’m going to sound like a broken record here, but unless we ‘go deep’ and start to become aware of why we are the way we are, we can’t repair and heal and become more and more the people we were created to be. What are you triggered by? When do you overreact or over-retreat? What does over-reacting or over-retreating look like to you?

There are 3 ways to do this journey. The **first is on your own**. If you have a good routine of doing a devotional time and praying to God you can definitely do a good deal of this on your own. You don’t have to fix everything all at once. In fact, don’t. I don’t know about you, but I sometimes get tired of myself and wonder, will I ever change?

I encourage you to take a moment in silence and just let the Holy Spirit lift up one issue that he wants you to work on. Remember that if all you hear is a general sense that you are useless and no good, that is not God. That is the enemy wanting to take you down. The Holy Spirit will give you one bite sized thing to work on. For me for example I began (and still am) taking the step of simply recognizing when I am angry and giving voice to that anger by saying “I am angry”. Then I look for patterns of when I am prone to anger and how I deal with it.

The **second way is with a group**. Join a study or take a course that will help you dig deeper into yourself. We have lots of people in our church who with the help of a group are intentionally doing work of interior examination. Any who have started on the journey of the 12 steps are doing a journey of interior examination. This interior work of emotional healing is something that we take very seriously at this church. Courses like the Forgiveness course and the Set Free Conference along with the Life Study group that allows anyone to go through the 12 steps are all designed to help us with that interior work and emotional healing.

The **third way is with a counsellor**. Often people wait to see a counsellor until they are in a crisis situation. But working with a trained counsellor is like having a guide through a trail you've never been on before. You're likely to get to where you want to go faster and better with the help of a guide.

Of course, the honest truth is we need all three: individual, group and one-on-one work. If you are willing to go deep and do some of the work of interior examination you will need 3 things:

1. The 1st is time. You will need to be intentional and carve out some time to do it. This work is so important but until it's a full-blown crisis it is never urgent. Believe me that it's better to do this work when it's not a crisis. Everything else will crowd in and demand your time.
2. The 2nd thing you will need is some courage. It's not easy facing your true self. It's easy to blame others or a situation for making you react. If you had better parents, better relationships, better co-workers, better teachers, a better church you wouldn't react this way. It's so much harder to look in a mirror and see your part in these situations and where you need to change.
3. The 3rd and the most important — **You will need to surrender your whole self to God**. God is the one who heals. We show up — but God does the healing. You will need to remind yourself that God created you and knows you and loves you just the way you are ... and longs to heal you and bring you to maturity.

Friends, this isn't just nice to do—like taking up knitting or yoga. This has been an incredibly difficult and stressful year. It's hard to believe that we are coming up to a full year of the borders closed and living with the restrictions of the pandemic. Stressful times bring out all of those hurts and bad habits. And they don't just affect us — they spill over like toxic waste in every area of our life. Doing interior work can save a marriage or relationship with your child. Doing interior work can save your life or the life

of another. Suicide rates have escalated during the pandemic, and so have addiction rates and mental illness. Doing this work gives resiliency for stressful times.

Jesus offers life. This life is not just for the sweet hereafter, but for here and now. This life will set you free — free to live and to bring more love to this broken world. God knows you need it. God knows I need it. God knows this broken world needs healing and life.

Thanks be to God.