

**"What God Is *Not*"**  
**Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**August 1, 2010**  
**Text: Hosea 11:1-11**  
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It's been several years ago now, but in one of the early episodes of the television series *L. A. Law*, the character played by Harry Hamlin was trying to put the moves on the character played by Susan Dey. She admitted that while she felt something for him, nevertheless she was committed at the time to someone else and was not ready to abandon that commitment. So she says to Hamlin's character a line that has stuck with me ever since, "Being an adult means that you don't have to act on all your feelings." I have thought about that a lot, because I fully agree with it. A part of maturity, an extremely important part of maturity, is getting to the point where we don't have to act on each and every feeling we have.

Children do not have this option. Children almost always act on their feelings. They can't help it; it is a part of what it means to be a child. It is not until children begin to grow up that they learn self-control and self-restraint. When a child feels hungry, the child acts on that feeling. When a child is angry, you know it by some action. When a child feels the need for attention, the child is going to demand it by

way of some sort of behavior. There usually is no doubt about what a child is feeling. Children show us exactly how they feel by acting on their feelings, *all* of their feelings.

I want to make one thing clear before I go any further in this sermon. *Feelings are not bad.* It is normal and beneficial to have feelings. Feelings are absolutely essential. In order to be fully functional human beings, we need to have an affective side as well as a cognitive side, a right brain as well as a left brain. Feelings motivate us to do a lot of things that we need to do. Sometimes it is our feelings, what comes out of the emotional side of us, that can motivate us into action in ways that thinking alone cannot.

There are some times, however, that we can't wait on our feelings to motivate us. There are some things we must do even when we don't feel like it. I ran across this quote the other day. The famous biologist, Thomas H. Huxley, once commented that "perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not; it is the first lesson that ought to be learned; and however early a [person's] training begins, it is probably the last lesson [he or she] learns thoroughly."

A lot of the feelings we have *need* to be acted on. For example, when we love someone—care about him or her, feel strongly toward

that person, value a great deal our relationship with that someone—we should act on those feelings in appropriate ways, of course. Kisses, hugs, handshakes, pats on the back, high fives or fist bumps are all ways in which we physically act on some of our positive feelings. We may write notes, compose poems, make up songs, choose a card, or send an e-mail to express how we feel. We may say some thoughtful and meaningful thing to someone to articulate our feelings about that person. It is good to act on a lot of the feelings we have.

However, there are certain feelings that we can have from time to time that we need to be careful about acting on. In our lectionary text today from Hosea, the prophet is describing how God feels about Israel. Notice how God is obviously angry with the nation. We talked about this last week as well. God has every reason to be. Although God, like a loving parent, has nurtured and cared for the people, they have turned away from the Lord. The nation's actions have hurt God deeply, leaving him infuriated. Yet God refuses to act on that anger. He says, "I will not execute my fierce anger . . ." Why? Because, as God says of himself, "I am God and no mortal."

God has feelings, yet God is not a human being. That is what God is *not*. God does not have to act on all his feelings the way we think we have to. Apparently, a part of what it means to be God is exercising the ability to choose *not* to act on feelings. As Christians, we are

called to be like *God*. That is a high calling and a lofty goal to be sure, but that is what we are called to be—*Godlike*. So that means, among other things, that we are called in certain cases to choose not to act on those feeling that can result in inappropriate behavior. While we can't choose what feelings to have, since they are almost automatic, we *can* help how we act on them. We can choose what to do with our feelings. What are some of the feelings we need to be careful about acting on?

**We need to be careful about acting on our anger.** All of us have been angry or get angry from time to time. Some of us seem to stay angry most of the time. Anger is a part of our lives, and all anger is not bad. The Bible instructs us to "be angry, but do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26a). Jesus became angry enough to drive the moneychangers out of the temple. There are some things that should anger us, and it is not good to hold our anger in. We can implode that way. But our anger probably gets us in trouble quicker than any other emotion. When we get mad, we can do some really stupid things. Good people have gone to prison for a single, thoughtless act committed in a state of rage. We need to be careful about acting on our anger. We are most likely to be out of control and irrational when we are angry.

**We need to be careful about acting on our desires.** We want a great deal; our appetites are enormous. In fact, our desire for instant gratification has turned all of us into impatient consumers.

Like children, when we want something, we don't understand why we can't have it immediately. Our wanting it should be enough to justify our having it. So we are hungry people, and we are hungry for many of the wrong things, those things that really will not nourish us ultimately.

*We don't need everything we feel we want. We want a lot more than we actually require for living. When what we want becomes more important than anything else, there can be a great deal of damage done to relationships. Either we tend to use people to get what we want or hurt the people who stand in the way of our getting what we want. And so we must be careful about acting on what we feel are our needs. Those "needs," so to speak, may be inappropriate and even self-destructive desires we have rationalized into needs.*

**We need to be careful about acting on our prejudices.** All of us have prejudices. We have pre-judged some person or groups of persons. We might as well admit it. Our culture, or any culture for that matter, teaches us certain patterns of prejudice. We can't help being prejudiced, but what we can help is how we act on it. We may not feel like treating everyone equally—with respect and dignity, with kindness and consideration, with fairness and justice—but we can do it anyway. We may not feel like standing up for the rights of those who are different from us, but we can choose to.

**We need to be careful about acting on our insecurity.**

Perhaps even more than anger, it is our insecurity that gives us problems. All of us are insecure, and our basic insecurity leads to a host of inappropriate attitudes—such as jealousy, envy, covetousness, spitefulness—and these attitudes then lead to actions that can destroy our relationships. Deep down we don't feel good about ourselves, so we want what someone else has or we try to exert power and control over others in order to make us feel better about who we are. More than anything, it is the acting on our feelings of insecurity that causes us such relational problems.

**We need to be careful about acting on our depression.** As is true of all of the feelings I have mentioned, they occur in every one of us at some time or other. All of us get depressed. Life is tough, tough enough to depress even the most emotionally and psychologically strong person. We must act on our depression in some creative way in order to avoid being overcome by it.

Depression can make us feel like running away and hiding, like staying in bed and never getting up, like taking some narcotic to end the pain, or as we have seen far too much of in the news over the past couple of months, depression can make us feel like killing someone we love and then ourselves. Depression can drive seemingly reasonable,

rational people into some very drastic and deadly actions, and because it can, we need to be extremely careful about acting on our depression.

**We need to be careful about acting on our fears.** Like depression, fear can immobilize us. When fear leads to dread or panic, we may find ourselves unable to function. Undue fear can make us act inappropriately and irresponsibly, particularly when what we fear is really just the unknown. Rational fear is healthy; it can keep us out of trouble. But such irrational fear as paranoia can cause us to act in destructive ways.

All of this is to say that our feelings, even those that can cause us problems when we act on them in unsuitable ways, are natural and good in and of themselves. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of our feelings. We need to acknowledge how we feel and learn to act on our feelings in acceptable ways. And as Christians, children of God, we are called to imitate our heavenly Parent. We are called to have godly character traits. As indicated in this passage from Hosea, God does not have to act on all his feelings. God is free not to do what he feels like doing. So are we, for we are created in God's image. We need to be careful about acting on our feelings in such a way that it would cause harm either to ourselves or our relationships with others.