

The Gospel According to Pixar sermon series

“Inside Out”

[Ecclesiastes 3:1-8](#)

Emotions are something we don't talk a lot about at church. We especially tend to avoid talking about our negative emotions. We seldom hear about our anger, anguish, or anxiety; our depression, disappointment, or disgust; our fears and frustrations; our guilt; our hopelessness and hurt; our Jealousy; our rejection and resentment; the sadness, shame, or sorrow that we carry; or our worries.

One of the music staff at my former church used to say whenever I picked a hymn that contained these negative emotions, “Oh no, not that one. It sounds too sad; or it sounds too depressing; or it sounds like a funeral song.” And I don't think this person was alone in thinking this way. We all tend to want to keep the dark clouds away. But, today, through the Pixar film, *Inside Out*, we will discover that all emotions are God's gifts to us. They are all good and help us to grow in our relationships with God and with one another.

The movie *Inside Out* revolves around the life of an 11-year old girl named Riley. It beautifully weaves together what is happening in her inner and outer worlds. On the surface, the story follows Riley as she moves across the country with her parents, leaving behind her home, her friends and her hockey team in Minnesota. We watch as she tries to adjust to her new life in San Francisco. But, we also get to see inside Riley. In her mind, there is another world where 5 personified emotions of Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust live. And we see how they work together to guide her through her transition. Let's take a brief tour of Riley's inner world.

The place where the emotions live is called Headquarters. In the control room, it is Joy who leads the team of feelings. From behind their respective control panels, the emotions manage everything Riley thinks, feels, and does in her everyday life. Memories of Riley's life experiences are processed in the shape of color-coded orbs, with each color being determined by the emotion associated with the experience. There is also a set of Core Memories that generate Personality Islands, such as Hockey Island and Family Island. These islands determine who Riley is as a person.

At first, everything is fine in both of Riley's worlds. With her loving parents and friends, and her participation in hockey, Riley is a happy girl. But, her family move turns everything in her life upside down. It's not an easy move for her and her parents, as things do not go as planned. The sudden change in Riley's life upsets the daily rhythm of the well-balanced emotions in her mind. Joy, the most dominant emotion tries to keep things under control and help Riley stay positive and upbeat during her difficult transition. But, the emotions in Headquarters begin to wrestle with one another on how to best navigate Riley's life in this new place.

Unfortunately, because they are so occupied with the details involved in their transition, Riley's parents are too busy to notice the changes in their daughter's emotional state. Her mother believes Riley is doing just fine in the midst of the stressful transition and is proud of her. Let's take a look at the first clip. [*Show clip #1*]

“You’ve stayed our happy girl. And, if you and I can just keep smiling that would really help out?” At first, these words seem to be perfectly fine. What’s wrong with telling someone who is going through a difficult time to keep smiling and stay positive? I’m sure we’ve heard similar advice or given such counsel to someone who is feeling down. However, even though she intended to help her daughter with these words, what she actually asked Riley to do was to not feel what she was feeling, to deny her true emotions, to stuff them inside her. And, honestly, for many of us, that’s exactly what we do when certain emotions appear in our lives.

Perhaps, sometime ago in your life, something unpleasant happened to you, and you heard, “O honey, don’t feel bad.” Or, something terrible happened to you, and you heard, “Don’t be upset. It’s nothing.” Or, something terrified you, and you heard, “Don’t be scared. There is nothing to be afraid of.” Or, someone whom you loved died, and you heard, “Don’t cry. She is with the Lord.” “Don’t be sad. He is in a better place.” “Time will heal, and you will be alright.” So, you hid your true emotions from others. Like Riley, you stuffed them inside you. You kept smiling and pretending, wearing your “I am fine” mask. After awhile, you even began to believe that you were really fine.

But, the truth about ourselves is this. When we deny our emotions, they never go away, and we are stuck with them. Then, when life takes a turn, the emotions we buried within us come alive. And, we end up reliving our past, and we react to certain incidents or circumstances with an explosion of emotions. Emotions which had been suppressed, deep under the surface.

Going back to *Inside Out*, on her first day of school in San Francisco, Riley ends up crying in front of her classmates while she is describing her life back in Minnesota. This experience leaves a powerful impression on her, and a new core memory is created inside Headquarters. Immediately, Joy tries to get rid of the sad memory before it reaches the central part of Riley’s mind, but Sadness keeps taking it. During their struggle, they both get sucked out of Headquarters and transplanted to the land of Long-Term Memory.

Joy and Sadness try to get back to Headquarters, as quickly as possible. Along their journey, they come across Riley’s imaginary friend, Bing Bong, who knows the way back to Headquarters. But, he is not willing to help them when he is suddenly overcome with sadness over something precious he lost. Joy and Sadness have to do something to help him change his mind. Let’s take a look. [*Show clip #2*]

Sadness allowed herself to be vulnerable and feel with Bing Bong. She shared in Bing Bong’s sadness, giving him the space that he needed to talk about how he was feeling. It was by sitting with Bing Bong in his place of pain, being a source of comfort where he was, that Sadness could help him move forward. And this is when Joy begins to realize that Sadness has a role to play. That Sadness can do things Joy cannot do.

Contrary to the common assumptions about negative emotions, we Christian believers are called to embrace all of the human emotions we experience and accept them as God’s gifts. We do so because we follow the example set by our Lord, Jesus Christ. According to the Gospels, that’s what Jesus did -- he embraced the entirety of the human experience.

- Jesus was filled with joy when he sent out his disciples (Luke 10:21). And he talked about joy and rejoicing, often in his parables (Luke 15:4-32, John 11:15; 15:11; 17:13).
- Jesus had compassion on people (Matthew 14:14, Mark 6:34; 8:11), so he taught them, healed them, and fed them.
- Jesus was angry and distressed as religious leaders argued with him about the rules of the Sabbath (Mark 3:5).
- Jesus was sad and wept when his friend, Lazarus died (John 11:35), and he wept again while he was looking over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41).
- Jesus was in anguish the night before his death. He said to his disciples, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:34)

Do you hear it? Joy, compassion, sadness, sorrow, anger, fear, and disgust - they were all part of Jesus’ emotions, and he embraced them all. He was honest about his feelings and did not try to hide or manipulate them into something they were not.

Going back to Headquarters inside Riley’s mind, in the absence of Joy and Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust try to maintain Riley’s emotional state. But, the results are not good. Riley distances herself from her parents and friends and becomes an unhappy kid. Anger plugs into Riley’s control panel the idea to run away back to her old hometown, believing they can produce new happy core memories there. So, Riley steals her mother’s credit card and buys a bus ticket and gets on a bus bound to Minnesota.

Eventually, Joy and Sadness make it back to Headquarters. But this time, instead of trying to handle everything, Joy lets Sadness take control. And it is Sadness who successfully unplugs Anger’s idea, and brings Riley safely home. Let’s take a look at the next clip and see what happens when Sadness reinstalls the sad Core Memories. *[Show clip #3]*

Have you ever honestly revealed to someone the emotions you had stuffed inside and carried with you for a long time? Do you remember how you felt better after the act of unloading, sharing your true self? Certainly, there is something cleansing and relieving in the act of letting out the emotions we carry deep within us.

Many years ago, a middle aged man came into my office and confided with me about the feelings he had toward other men. It was a secret that he had kept from others all his life. I will never forget the deep sigh of relief he took and the bright smile that appeared on his face when he finally finished sharing his story.

Brothers and sisters, remember that all emotions are God’s gifts to us. When we try to deny or manipulate our emotions, we reject the gift that God has given to us. So, instead of shutting down other people’s emotions by saying, “Don’t feel sad.” “Don’t be angry.” “Don’t be scared.” “Don’t be upset,” let us help each other to embrace God’s gift of emotions. This begins by listening to their stories, even simply acknowledging their feelings. And may we be present to all of our own emotions. Because by fully embracing who we are, even the so-called negative emotions that dwell inside us, we will grow deeper in our relationship with God and with others.

As today's scripture reading talks about, there is a time for everything. There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to love and a time to hate. We experience different emotions at different times. Trust that God is present in all these different times in our lives, in all the different emotions. May we trust that even in our sadness, God is bringing to us healing and wholeness.

By the end of the film, Joy is no longer micromanaging Headquarters. Instead, Joy is working together with Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust. The result is that Riley's Core Memories become multicolored and multifaceted. Through the difficult transition in her life, Riley has grown and is a happy girl again.

Let's take a look at the final clip.

[Show clip #4, followed by "Feel the Light" sung by Samuel Akapo]