

[1] September 22, 2024

Sermon Title: Trees Planted by Streams

Scripture: Psalm 1

Theme: Making a theological and biblical case for empathy.

[2] Happy are [we] who do not follow the advice of scoffers, but delight in the law of the Lord, and meditate day and night on it. [We] are like trees planted by streams (irrigation canals) of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and [our] leaves do not wither.” 1:1-3. John’s vision of the tree of life standing beside the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, with twelve kinds of fruit, producing each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:1-2)

Our theme for the 60th Anniversary was “oaks of righteousness” planted to the glory of God, to comfort those who mourn, to proclaim good news to the oppressed, to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to the prisoners, (the opening of prison doors to free those who are bound), to bind up (heal) the broken hearted. (Is. 61:1-3; Lk. 4:18) and to pour the healing oil of joy onto our sorrow and sadness, our depressions and despair. This is a lot to take in at one hearing or reading of the scripture that defines the mission of Christ Jesus. There is even more, if we dare to go there: “to show hospitality to strangers ... and to remember those who are in prison, as though we were in prison with them, those who are being tortured, as if we were ourselves being tortured.” (Heb. 13:2-3). In other words, we are called beyond hospitality to empathy. This is my proposal this morning, to make a biblical and theological case for having empathy. This word is being tossed around in our world with various connotations, some good and some bad. “To be or not to be,” that is the question: “to be empathetic, or not to be so.” What is the case for empathy?

[3] Let’s first read from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (9:16-23).

“Though I am free (*eleutheros*, liberated) and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave (*douloó*, enslaved) to everyone ... To the Jews I became like a Jew (*Ioudaios*) ... To those under the law I became like one under the law (*anomos*, lawless) [*ennomos Christos*] ... To the weak (*asthenés*, unable to achieve anything great) I became weak ... I have become **all things to all people** so that by all possible means I might save some.” [All things now I do on account of the gospel that a fellow partaker (*sugkoinónos*, share fellowship in solidarity) with it I might become.]

Empathy is not always so apparent to us when we read the Scriptures, but it does

underlie much of our Christian theology. It is a matter of church doctrinal tradition ... that Christ has shared our grief and pain so completely and carried our sorrows (Is. 53:4-5) so thoroughly, that we might be healed into wholeness, and saved from alienation and estrangement, and from our sins. The [4] prophet Ezekiel describes a tender moment that changed his life when he sat where [others] sat, where the exiles sat, along the River Chebar, remaining among them in a “stunned” condition (Ezek. 3:15). The reason behind the call to welcome the stranger in the First Testament is empathy, “for you know the heart of a stranger, because you also were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex. 23:9).”

The Letter to the Hebrews records some of that underlying empathy for others that living in Christ provides: “He is able to deal gently with those who are willfully ignorant and misguided” because he himself has experienced the same deprivation and powerlessness which underlies these behaviors (Heb. 5:2). Christ was “tempted in every way that we are and yet was without sin,” and because of this fact, we may also “receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:15-16).” In some prayer circles, we are encouraged to believe that Christ shares our identity so closely that he knows us better than we know ourselves.

[5] Theologically speaking, two words that we often confuse are the words ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy.’ What is the difference? Sympathy is feeling compassion, sorrow or pity for the hardships of another person. Empathy is putting yourself in the shoes of that person. Both words share the same Greek root word ‘*páthos*,’ which means suffering or feeling. The pathos/passion of Christ, the suffering of Christ, is God walking in our shoes by putting distant sympathy to work in empathy. We feel empathy for another because we have ‘been there’ and ‘remember how we felt while we were there.’ Empathy is fellow-feeling, feeling ‘with’ another and not simply ‘as’ another. In many ways, we are more likely to trust someone who has been where we are and understand and be suspicious of someone who has not. Biblically speaking, the Greek word “*koinonia*” is translated as “fellowship,” or “fellow-feeling,” and this is a little more than just sharing a meal or enjoying good conversation with friends. This type of fellowship of the Spirit means sharing the pain and sharing the joy of others in prayer and standing beside others during crisis. This is true friendship and true fellowship, and through the church we are baptized into that fellowship of caring Christians. The scripture goes on to refer to Jesus Christ as our “Advocate” using the same language that the Gospel of John uses when referring to the Holy Spirit. This word, in the New Testament Greek, is *Paraclete* and simply means the “one beside us”, the one who listens and cares and stands beside us in danger. Jesus Christ is the ultimate symbol of this caring fellowship and also the reason for it.

Nothing says empathy like a Spirit that knows what we think before we think it (Ps. 44:21), what we do before we do it (Eph. 2:10), and what we are going to say before we say it (Ps. 139:4). In some real sense that we cannot explain in words, God pre-knows us through the intentions of our heart (Acts 1:24). God's empathy with us should shape our own empathy for others. If we see our brother's need and our sister's need, and we have the resources to meet those needs, then we find ourselves without the Spirit if we ignore those needs (1 John 3:17,24). In some strange twist of science, the Holy Spirit allows us to arrive at our destination before we ever leave for it. We are pre-known and pre-loved; this shapes our current and future knowing and loving. We can be empathetic because God was first empathetic with us. God knows us before we are born because we have the image of God inside of us. We have the mark of belonging to God. Alas, many of us do not often act like it, but we do have it. Our greatest challenge in life is to act like we have that divine mark. Our greatest failure is in denying it. Paul gives his own account of how important empathy is in his evangelistic mission, "that I might become a fellow partaker of life," one who seeks to share fellowship in solidarity with others, no matter what their circumstance. He says, "though free, I submitted myself into slavery for those who needed me." (v.19).

There are some who consider that Paul might have taken empathy too much to heart, such as when he offers to take the place of one condemned by the community of Rome, in the words of Paul, making himself *anathema* (cursed and cut off from Christ), so that this one might be saved (Romans 9:3), offering not just his life but his soul. Yes, even empathy has its limits. We can only walk so far in another's shoes and still be authentic.

A case in point comes from the tragic life-story of Todd Becker of Kearney, Nebraska, who warns all of us, not to drink and drive, not to abuse alcohol or other drugs, not to drive wildly at high speeds, especially with others in the car with you, but even for your own sake, to love yourself and others enough to avoid the dangers of youth who understandably feel invincible, but yet to the dismay of all of us most decidedly are not. The principle here is that you do not have to share the experience to benefit from the testimony. Todd seriously reminds us: "Don't envy me and don't repeat what I did, as if to say, "I bear the scars of having gone too far, but Christ has redeemed me and I live to be his witness to choosing life over death."

Beware proleptic empathy, that is, empathy that looks too far ahead of itself. Getting out too far ahead of suffering, beyond critical mass, may mean you can no

longer warn others in your wake. Those, like the Man of La Mancha, who march into hell for a heavenly cause, may pay a horrible price for going beyond the point of no-return. Of course, substitutionary atonement also suggests an empathy beyond critical mass. In this atonement theory, the empathy of Christ goes all the way to the cross, Jesus sacrificing his life for ours, conquering death forever, to turn our lives around from the Pit of destruction and push us back from the edge of death's dominion to the safe havens of eternal life. But, regardless of whether you go along with this theory of atonement, it can truly be said, that with Christ, it is never too late; there is always a chance to redeem and be redeemed. With Christ, you never find yourself 'east of eden in the land of Nod,' never beyond the Omni-Present eyes of the Holy Spirit; The Holy Spirit aside, with Christ, it is never possible to cross over into the land of the unforgiven. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last (Rev. 22:13; Is. 44:6; 48:12), the Advanced Guard and the Rear Guard, Christ both leads the way into danger, taking the first assault, and brings up the rear to protect the stragglers, taking the last assault. So, before we are anywhere, Christ has already been there! And Christ is always the last to leave!

So, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, in the original language, it is not that Paul has already become all things to all people, but that he seeks to be so, that a fellow-partaker, one in solidarity with others, he might become. He does so that he might become more and more like Christ. The early church father, Jerome, once wrote: "Never be joyful except when you look on your brother or sister with compassion (agape love)." When Jerome wrote these words, he was looking at Ephesians, chapter 5, "live in love as Christ has loved us (Eph. 5:1-4)." God wants the best for each one of us, a whole and healthy life, so that you can become all that you were meant to be, truly living within your identity, comfortable with who you truly are. Be the whole person God created you to be.

[6] The biological case for empathy has been made by Psychologist Dacher Keltner recently in a published study he conducted on the human brain and nervous system in which he showed that there is a physical component to our spiritual values. When we feel compassion or empathy, a part of our brain called the 'periaqueductal gray' lights up, and the largest bundle of nerves in our body, called the 'vagus nerve,' stretching from the brain to the abdomen, is visibly activated. He suggests that we, as human beings, are 'wired to care,' or 'built to be kind,' that the strongest instinct we have is sympathy (or empathy), mirroring in our own bodies the feelings of those we see who are suffering.

One of the more interesting phrases used in the First Testament that describes

“empathy” occurs with respect to the ancient battlefield: “My life was precious in your eyes today,” or “my blood (KJV: my soul) was precious in your sight today.” (1 Sam. 26:21; Ps. 72:14; 2 Kgs. 1:13-14). In the moral injury literature, we find these words of a fictional army sergeant named Lauren Clay who has returned to civilian life in her hometown, summing up her experience. She says: “Sometimes I still feel like I am looking at others as through a rifle scope,” without even realizing it. Such a perspective tends to remove us from the possibility of empathy. The opposite of seeing others through a rifle-scope is seeing others face to face, knowing in full and knowing as we have been known. The rifle scope removes surprise from our living; we can see up close without being there. It is a challenge to see life through another’s eyes, or through God’s eyes, as precious when you are surrounded by trauma.

Many medics or battlefield nurses are able to build up what is called ‘spiritual resistance,’ to help them get through the deployment. Quoting one of these from the literature: “It is exhausting sometimes to be a nurse, you have to find a source of spiritual renewal; it means you have to have a source of strength outside of yourself that continually feeds you internally to allow you to keep going even when you do not want to.” “There are times when all of your empathy burns up and then you are just kind of there,’ said one nurse. Working with a lack of empathy can also result in moral injury or moral distress; the caregiver needs care. Spiritual resistance refers to the refusal to have your spirit broken amid horrible degradation. Reducing our empathy helps us get through difficult times. Yet, regaining our spiritual empathy informs us that our wounded are NOT broken or deficient. Though their story is difficult, we need to listen with empathetic ears.

I like what our General Minister, Terry Owens has to say on this topic: ‘difference is not deficiency.’ She said, ‘we need to understand our many differences of experience with Godly respect, finding the common strength between us, sharing our burdens with each other. “God’s Power is consistent with God’s Love.” It is not that God’s Love is consistent with God’s Power, but that God’s Power is consistent with God’s Love.” So, Paul is able to proclaim: ‘We were gentle among you like a nurse tenderly caring ... you were so important to us that we gave you not only the Gospel, but also our own selves.’ In other words, Paul could say; “our sympathy crossed over into empathy.”

[7] I leave you with an example of how Jesus displayed empathy, recorded in Luke 7:11-17.

“When the Lord saw her, his heart broke [He had compassion on her] and he said,

“Do not cry.” Then he went up and touched the coffin (bier), and those carrying it stood still. “Young man,” He said, “I tell you, get up!” And the dead man sat up and began to speak! Then Jesus gave him back to his mother....”

As Jesus approached the gate leading into the town of Nain, he encountered a funeral procession on its way to the cemetery. Jesus is not alone; his disciples are beside him and a large crowd is following him. No one is expecting the situation they are walking into. Laughing, loud talking, excitement upon finally, after a long journey, arriving at the gate. But now an obstacle, a distraction, directly in their path. What now? Jesus is probably wondering how to get everyone to make a pathway for the procession to pass through. He is probably wondering how to get everyone to move to one or another side of the road. The narrator tells us that a single Mom has lost her only son. She and her family are following behind the pallbearers and the coffin, the bier. A large crowd is following her to the burial site. A large crowd is meeting a large crowd. There is no good protocol for such a situation. Something has to give; normally it would not be the grieving family. It is obvious that a delay of ritual is in the making. How would it be possible to keep the proper silence to show respect for the grieving? No one wants the embarrassment of crashing into a ritual uninvited, especially a funeral ritual. Yet as the tired, traveling crowd approaches the disciplined, ceremonial crowd, some type of disruption necessarily lies ahead.

In the middle of this meeting of irresistible forces and immovable objects, as the saying goes, comes an unexpected line in the narrative: “When Jesus saw her, his heart broke, and he said “Don’t cry.” Divine compassion breaks into the middle of human disruption! Personal empathy breaks into the middle of crowd confusion. Everyone in the background freezes in place as the one-on-one, face to face, conversation takes place. Understanding in the midst of distraction. Intercession in the midst of anxiety; Love in the midst of apathy. Confidence in the midst of uncertainty. The opposite of being lonely in a crowd. Being surrounded by a friendly silence. Being heard before one speaks. “When the Lord saw her, his heart broke, he had compassion, and he said, “Do not cry.”

This is my proposal. This is my biblical and theological and biological case for empathy. Alleluia! Amen.

