

## *Empathy, Vulnerability, and Immanuel*

Hebrews 2:14-18

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*<sup>14</sup> Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— <sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. <sup>16</sup> For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. <sup>17</sup> For this reason he had to be made like them,<sup>[a]</sup> fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup> Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

Back when I worked as a case manager, Brene Brown came into my consciousness with her work on empathy. Empathy was talked about so much in our social work circles, in fact, that we often made jokes about it. Empathy is a learned skill, we were told. Empathy is learning another’s world view. As Brene Brown would say, “our” perspective is not “the” perspective.

This was all fine when I worked with high schoolers in the public school. I saw their home lives, met their parents and guardians, and observed them in their classroom environment. I felt I spent more time with these children than many of their family and friends. I saw them struggle with decision making, staying clean, and learning the basics of how to live independently which included learning how to interact with adults. I had huge files on them and could point out to them how they were progressing, and encouraging them to “stick with it.”

A few years later, I was working as a different type of case manager in DC. My clients were adults, all of whom had been chronically homeless (which means 6+ years) and struggled with severe and persistent mental illness. How the last part of that sentence played out often meant schizophrenia, although there are many mental illnesses just as insidious when they’re severe and persistent.

I thought all those empathy skills that I was honing since childhood would come in handy. I just knew that I’d be the most empathetic, most caring social worker that my nonprofit had ever seen. It wouldn’t be easy, but it shouldn’t be too terribly hard.

It seems I grossly overestimated my own empathy. The first time I had something thrown at me I was ready to take my earrings out and get into it with whoever had the guts to throw something at me. At ME! I was trying to help! How dare they!

Lacking empathy in times of crisis was only the tip of the iceberg. I saw folks use their monthly disability check on drugs, or use all of their money on 1 pair of shoes, or move out of the apartment we searched for them for months because they didn't like the way their neighbor looked at them one day. What was with all these horrible decisions? What were they thinking? Were they intentionally trying to make their support circle's job harder? Why couldn't they just do the right thing for once?

What I thought I had developed wasn't empathy, it was more like some sort of sympathy.

Empathy is a word that gets thrown around a lot, and my thought is that a lot of people would see themselves as empathetic. But we often see ourselves in a different light than others see us. Empathy not only involves learning about someone else's world view, but also, the level of empathy someone has is formed by their relationships.

Our scripture passage from Hebrews points to a sort of "extreme empathy." We read that "he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he may break the power of him who holds the power of death" in reference, of course, to the Devil. They go on to say that "for this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he may become a more merciful and faithful high priest.

I want to be clear that I'm not at all advocating that social workers are like high priests...although they have really hard and dangerous jobs to do so please be kind to them, but social workers are gatekeepers, in a way. So is a high priest. And in order to have authenticity and credibility in this role, it required Jesus to be "fully human in every way." This, in turn, made him a merciful and faithful high priest. So, before I go down this road of making dangerous comparisons that may not pan out, I'll just say that for Jesus to become a high priest, to become a gatekeeper, to become an image of salvation, he had to be empathetic.

That may sound like a trite word for the Savior of the World, but I don't think we give empathy enough credit or weight. Empathy is a powerful thing, but it can often get tossed to the side as an emotion. And a "fluffy" emotion at that. I think it's because we often equate it with sympathy. Sympathy is a "nice" emotion. We have sympathy for a lot of things. People who are less fortunate than us, tragedies that take place all over the world, the person at the end of the line for the restroom. Empathy is a different thing entirely.

Research professor Brene Brown writes and talks a lot about empathy. She brings up how empathy is a choice, and it's a vulnerable choice, that someone can make. Empathy enters into a situation with someone and says "I know what it's like here." In order to connect with another person, you have to connect with something inside yourself that knows that feeling. This can be difficult to do.

Where I see this fitting into our scripture is the concept of the incarnation. We can argue all day about atonement theories, why did Jesus have to die, is Jesus' death the salvific nature of God, etc. And I personally like those discussions and think they should be had. But setting that aside for a moment, let's take a look at what incarnation actually means. Sure, incarnation means God coming to us in the form of a baby in a manger, something we celebrated only a few weeks ago. The baby's name, Immanuel, means "God with us." But even with that, what does it actually mean?

I think this all comes back to empathy. God reaching into to God's experiences as Jesus in order to be able to sit with us, be with us, be vulnerable with us, as a form of connection; ultimate, divine connection.

And sometimes in the face of difficult conversations we try to make things better. Rarely can a response make something better. What makes something better is connection. And that connection is the ability to forge meaningful, authentic relationships with other people. Brene Brown looks at connection on a continuum. On the one end is empathy, and on the other end is shame.

Empathy is about being vulnerable with people in their vulnerability.

I know I've often looked to God to speak clearly into my life in some way or another so I can feel better, or have more faith, or feel more secure about who I am. And many people have felt God speak directly into their life and it

has had the power to change them. But what happens when we hear nothing? What happens when it seems that God is silent? What if we wait for that voice, that sign, that call...but it never happens?

If we go back to Brown's definition of sympathy, we find that sympathy has a lot of "answers." Sympathy says, "Oh, too bad." Sympathy says "Well, at least it's not worse." Sympathy says, "Look at everything that's going great in your life! At least that's not a problem for you right now!" While we feel God in our own spiritual lives, and through the words of others, let's remember that words are not the end all, be all, of human or divine experience.

Empathy is that connection between the human and the divine. Empathy is that presence that sits with you, sees you, sees your vulnerability and expresses vulnerability, and offers to listen. Like our scripture says, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

There's a lot of bad theology floating around that has done people a lot of harm when it comes to suffering. There are "divine words," advice, and sympathy that masquerades as compassion, understanding, and love. You don't have to look far in your church family or your friend circle to find someone who has been told, "God is telling you to....fill in the blank." God is keeping you in that situation to teach you a lesson. God is using you as an example. And it's sympathy and advice-giving like this that has hurt a whole lot of people in the church, some of whom aren't even here anymore because of it.

Empathy is at the core of Christ's incarnation and is the antidote to our interpretations of what we're being told. I mean that on a large scale...the antidote to what we're being told on a day to day basis. I'm not saying that God doesn't speak or move in tangible ways, God certainly does, but I'm saying that if we are to trust the words of Hebrews, if we are looking to Christ as our teacher, leader, and example, we are being led in the ways of empathy. We are being led in the ways of sitting with others, listening, not advising, and offering a place of compassion where the world offers self help, dos, don'ts, and "at leasts."

But let's not forget some of the other key words and phrases Hebrews uses when talking about our salvation. It is described that Jesus is the "pioneer"

of our salvation. God liberates us from the bondage and fear (which can be a form of bondage) of death through the miracle of the resurrection.

The book of Hebrews is an exhortation to live a faithful life to God and Christ in order to further and solidify one's salvation. In this passage, Jesus becomes fully human and suffers a horrible death. But we also have to look at context. Jesus was obviously an enemy of the state, and died as any enemy of the state would, a humiliating and horrible death. Not to make light of Jesus' method of dying, but crucifixion was not new or unique when it came to capital punishment for whatever crimes deemed it necessary. Jesus suffered because he was human, and he came preaching a radical message that made the powerful and mighty scared and embarrassed.

By remembering this, it's possible to assume that Jesus' suffering and death makes us "saved." It is dangerous when we make black and white as well as casual connections to suffering and salvation. In the context of this Hebrews passage, I'm not arguing for or against that. But that's taking a narrow look at a very wide, panoramic picture. Jesus' incarnation saves us. Jesus' life saved people and changed people, the same as his death and eventual resurrection. We are saved by a God who knows pain and suffering. We are saved by a God who can't promise that in our earthly life we won't know what it's like to experience this. We are saved by a God who doesn't save us on the merits of our suffering, but rather, saves us by removing that which comes between us and our life of faith, which is what the book of Hebrews is all about.

Hebrews is all about the life of faith. In the midst of our own feelings of being lost, or feeling disconnected, of feeling the opposite of empathy, which is shame, we are encouraged to look to Jesus as the pioneer of our faith, the one who preserves faith in the face of unimaginable suffering. The scripture passage makes reference to the Israelites who's faith in God was tested during their wanderings in the wilderness. This scripture reminds us that the life of faith is more like a desert at times than a mountaintop.

As I mentioned earlier, the opposite of connection and empathy is shame. From shame stems these feelings of blame and judgement. And I find that to be an interesting parallel to this scripture passage, this explanation that Christ knew suffering, and through that, is with us, sees us, and knows us in our suffering. Shame and suffering are deeply connected, though that's not always the case.

Our suffering can certainly have its roots in shame. Maybe we are ashamed of how things are turning out with our families; how we suffer when it seems no one else is suffering in their situation. It could be our own self image. Maybe our identity has shifted and we're ashamed of what that brings up in us. It could be our own feelings. We feel anger, or we become anxious, we withdraw, or feel fantastic when it seems no one around us is feeling quite the same way. There could be moments from our past or secrets we can't even admit to ourselves that cause us to feel shame. This shame, in turn, can disconnect us not only from those we love and those who love us, but from God and our own faith.

Shame is the voice that is just as powerful as the voice, in this scripture passage, of the Devil. Shame tells you, no, you're not good enough for this. You're not strong enough for this. You're not pretty enough for this, you don't have enough education for this, you don't have enough experience for this, you're too young for this, you're too old for this, you can't do this. Brene Brown talks about shame having 2 big tapes that play over and over again, the first one is the one I mentioned, about not being good enough, the other one is "Who do you think you are?"

These are the stumbling blocks that Christ removes in order for us to receive salvation. Christ's death looked like a failure, or a mistake, or a lack of faithfulness on someone's part that achieved such a tragic end. But that wasn't the end of Christ's story. We can't pull out one moment of our lives that define, begin, and end our story and we can't do the same for Christ. The long arc of the narrative of salvation includes death, it includes suffering, it includes the bad, it includes the good. But the constant that's woven throughout this narrative is humanness. It's connection. It's empathy. It's God with us.

In looking back at my social work experience, I had lacked the selflessness, the understanding, and the vulnerability that comes with true empathy. That led to disconnection with my clients. This also led to my lack of understanding of their behaviors that were borne from years of operating in survival mode. Without making the effort to at least understand their situation, much less sit with them in their situation, I forged the opposite of empathy, which is shame. I was ashamed of the clients that made bad choices, I was ashamed of my clients that went back to using, I was ashamed of my own social work skills that probably contributed to them

lacking the tools they needed to be successful people, once again, making it about me and not about them.

Had I taken the time to be vulnerable myself, to look into my own habits and behaviors that had become problematic or that don't serve me well, and had I taken the time to do more listening and giving less advice, I would have been able to foster both empathy and connection. Which, in the end, would have caused everyone in my sphere less heartache, misunderstanding, and struggle.

Every time I preach I am asked about a song following the sermon. And I either thought of one before I started writing anything or I have an attitude of "Oh, I don't know!" I wanted to be careful when choosing a hymn following this sermon...while the theology surrounding atonement is certainly mentioned in this scripture passage, I have not made it the point of this message here today.

I chose Nothing is lost on the breath of God not because of it being one of my favorite songs in Sing the Purple, but because of its message that this list of very human emotions is not lost on God. Impulses of care, beginnings, endings, anything in creation, all these human things or things that humans encounter are very important to a seemingly other worldly and intangible God. The same God who became incarnate, experiencing death and loss as well as resurrection, is the same God of the universe that transcends our language and experiences.

It is my hope that when we sing this song, we realize that nothing in our human experience, not a single tear, not laughter, not pain, not joy is lost on God. We've experienced it, and God has experienced it, as well. The God we worship is a God who has felt our feelings, suffered through what we've suffered, and seeks to have empathy with us, and desires connection with us. That connection with us offers us a connection with the divine, offers us a connection to our salvation, and in turn, offers us connection with one another. Amen.