

EMPATHEOLOGY© Presentation Notes

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John Pavlovitz

Question:

What has your default emotional setting been recently?

"Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself." — Novelist Mohsin Hamid

"Our task must be to free ourselves... by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty." — Albert Einstein

"I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it." — Maya Angelou

Question: How did I end up here?

Empathy origin story/foundational voices/formative experiences

We are a product of our stories

Question: How did we end up here?

We of us are asking that question right now of the Church: How did we end up here? We see the attrition, we see the aging of our congregations, we see the growing difficulty or reaching and activating people. We are facing the uncertainty of life after the arrival of a pandemic. We are looking out across our nation and we see a rising expression of religion that while claiming to be of Jesus, often seems antithetical to him, often unwilling to make peace or to love the least. We too often see a church that reminds us that equity is still elusive, that all people are not fully seen, that justice is still delayed. The presence of Jesus should yield an exhale, a feeling *foundness* and of rest. And we see so much evidence of a Church that feels predatory. *How did we end up here?*

I ask that same question of our nation that I ask of myself and our nation: How did we end up here?

How in 2023 are we still talking about the value of a black life?

How are we still debating whether people can marry someone of the same gender?

How are we still questioning the validity of other religions?

How are we still so infected with racism and bigotry?

How did we end up with so many people denying science?

How did we end up here, with this bitterness?

I think we have ended up here, because we are facing a poverty of empathy. We have a close-fistedness that has even reached the church; a contagious contempt for people who disagree with us, a growing silence in the face of injustice, and a rising callousness for the least of these because the least of these are not always compatible with the American Dream. I think we have gradually (but recently more rapidly) become a compassion-deprived place,

We have a poverty of empathy

American dream:

personal liberties/capitalism/consumerism/competition/individualism

vs

collective liberation/generosity/collaboration/interdependent community

Compassion is countercultural, in practice if not stated language. It is an upstream effort.

Today we will sit with 2 wounds:

The wounds of the world

The wounds we sustain attending to the wounds of the world

Ministers, activists, caregivers, parents, empaths are usually aware of, attentive to, and respectful of the former over the latter.

We are adept at seeing fractures and identifying injustice outside the window but not in the mirror.

We want to think about the need for healers and the cost of being one.

Self-compassion is not optional but essential. Protecting the single most valuable and fragile resource we have in responding to the wounds of the world.

The central questions:

How can we have a compassionate heart for people and their pain, and not be swallowed up

by it?

How can we fight in a way so that we are not defined or overwhelmed by the fight?

How can we live a lifestyle of sustainable compassion?

I care about what you do, but more than that I care about who you are as you do that work. We cannot care for humanity well at the expense of our own humanity.

Empathy is an inside-out endeavor: Health > Authenticity > Congruence

The better we do at wisely carrying the trauma around us, the less distance there will be between our private and public selves.

It's exhausting to give a damn, isn't it?

To be a person of compassion in a time when compassion is in such great demand—to wake up every day in days like these, and push back against predatory politicians and toxic systems and human rights atrocities and acts of treason and leadership failures in the church and—the volume and the relentlessness of the threats can be wearying. You may have noticed.

You're carrying around big picture larger systemic and political realities, healthcare and immigration and women's health and LGBTQ rights, but you're not simply carrying these big picture, larger systemic and political realities—you're also carrying the people these behind these realities, the names and faces and the lives of specific human beings who are under duress right now; people whose stories you listen to and know and are living within, people you love.

These big realities and these individual stories begin to accumulate upon your shoulders and in your clenched jaw and in your elevated heart rate and in the knot in your stomach that returns every morning when you check Twitter or turn on the news or step out into your community—and you see reason for grief, places compassion is needed.

I'm not sure why you're here but you're probably here because you're a damn-giver; because you are a fierce lover of humanity—and as a result you probably walk into this place pissed off, disconnected, isolated, worn out—exhausted.

Whether you're an activist or a minister or a caregiver or just a citizen of the planet who is moved by other people's suffering—you feel the heaviness of these days (speed and activity can mask it for a while) but if you stop long enough, the reality of the fatigue catches up to you—you can measure the toll it's all taken on you.

I kinda want you to let that fatigue catch up with you.

There is a personal cost to compassion, there is a price tag to cultivating empathy in days when cruelty is trending. Many of us are drifting into apathy, to numbness, to a compassion fatigue.

Some symptoms of compassion fatigue:

irritability, impatience, physical illness, eating emotionally, addictive behavior, the inability to be present to the people who love you, an obsession with social media, a fixation on how bad things are.

Question: What compassion fatigue symptoms do you recognize in you lately?

"Empathy is the most mysterious transaction that the human soul can have, and it's accessible to all of us, but we have to give ourselves the opportunity to identify, to plunge ourselves in a story where we see the world from the bottom up or through another's eyes or heart."

- Sue Monk Kidd

There is a subtraction or attrition or depletion to compassion.

You are spending some resource on behalf of other people, whether time or energy or rest or resources or relational availability. Yes, you receive something in return, in fact:

"Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals." - Pema Chödrön

Reflection/Conversation Prompt:

Who or what is most heavily paying for your compassion?

When you fall into deficit, where is that primarily experienced?

Come up with 2 or 3 small and attainable ways to address your depletion.

One of the challenges of empathy is to have a diverse expression of that empathy. Many of us don't lack the ability to stay soft toward suffering, even prolonged suffering, however we may find that our empathy is selective.

Where and when have you experienced compassion prejudice: a hesitation or barrier to need around you?

What environments, people groups, or individuals challenge your capacity and desire for expressing empathy?

The past decade of my journey has been spent ministering to a sprawling, disparate virtual congregation made up of people all over this country. In my travels now, both in person and online, I do some speaking of course, but I do a lot of listening, too. I hear or read hundreds of stories each month, and at this point I don't consider myself primarily an author or a blogger or even a pastor—but a collector of stories: a war correspondent. I travel to a new town or show up in a different community or reach people online where they are and I enter the trenches of life with them and I say, "Tell me what's happening here on the ground so I can tell the folks back home." And this gives me a front row seat to their varied experience of being human.

People give me proximity to their pain, they show me their grief and share with me their struggles and they reveal their dreams. I bear witness to the words people speak, I listen for the places their voices shake, I sit with them in their anger, and I leave my time with them asking myself: What are they trying to say that they cannot quite verbalize? What do they wish people around them could hear if their voices could carry? How can I connect their humanity to the humanity that does not share their geographic or relational space—and that's the place I write and speak from. I do my best to be a translator of diverse experience and try to find the patterns in those disparate narratives.

We are collectors of stories. We get proximity and we bear witness.

One of the truths I often share with people is that we exist in both stories and in systems.

The stories are the individual human beings: original, unprecedented, once in history, never to be repeated creations with both singular uniqueness but with the same inherent value. (If you are a person of faith, each bearing the image of God, carrying the spark of the Divine. And merit respect befitting that fact. Every life is a story. But these lives exist in community and they exist in systems: larger realities, environments with rules, barriers, supports that all come to bear on the individual stories those systems govern and influence, and either nurture or impeded the stories.

We express empathy in the stories (individual need, relationship, narrative, personal interaction)

We express empathy in systems (collective need, justice, legislation, systemic need)

Energy orientation awareness: Look at the way your life is directed, the posture you find yourself in. Seeking a balance between the kinds of expressions of empathy.

“The route to achieving equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone equally. It will be achieved by treating everyone justly according to their circumstances.”

—Paula Dressel, Race Matters Institute

Compassion is a spending of yourself on behalf of someone else. (There is a subtraction.)

Compassion can make you physically and emotionally ill. (Trauma is embodied.)

COMPASSION WORD STUDY

The word we translate as *compassion* has its original roots in the word *bowels*.

It was once thought that the deepest emotions were housed in our organs, in our guts, so that

connection between pain and bowels makes sense. Contained in that word is the idea is that one could feel so deeply witnessing another's pain as to become internally disturbed, to the point of sickness.

This is why it's not inaccurate when we say that someone's story of suffering *moves* us. In the phrase, we're expressing that same internal solidarity with a person that reaches down into the very core of who we are, as we imagine their specific pain and feel some measure of it. We all have been sickened to our stomachs seeing the pain of other people.

The words Compassion is tied to the word bowels. We are moved with compassion. Compassion is a bowel movement!

There is an ancient phrase associated with compassion that says "I am twisted in bowels," I am internally altered by the suffering I see.

Reflection/Response Question: What "twists you in your bowels" as you do this work?

It's important that we identify particular areas of empathetic connection. We need to follow the burden, lean into the burden. This will be a particular place of affinity and we may feel acutely moved to step into this pain.

The danger is that we become martyrs of our own hearts.

Journal Writing Prompt:

Can you identify times/areas/ways in which you have had some or your identity tied to your work as a minister/caregiver/activist?

As you think about the things/people/causes that "twist you in your bowels," why do you think you feel a particular affinity to that suffering?

Barriers to Empathy and Practices to Overcome:

1) FEAR

Why is fear so important to understand and focus on? Because it drives all of us.

There are three kinds of fear:

Real: a genuine present threat that needs to be appropriately addressed.

Imagined: a threat that we are creating right now that does not exist.

Anticipatory: a future threat that we believe is coming and alters our present.

In the work I do as a pastor, caregiver, and consultant, people tell me things they don't feel they can tell anyone else—and that's good news for you, because you're in relationships with them. Often, when I meet people in my travels on speaking tours, we don't necessarily have a lot of time together. They might come up before or after a talk, tell me something deeply personal, and in a quick moment and without knowing any of their backstory—they're hoping I can give them something that they can take home with them to help them.

Empatheology 1:

Here's what I tell them: *Look for the fears and the false stories:* find out what people are afraid of and figure out why those fears might be misplaced or addressed—because no one is at their best when they're terrified.

When we're in conflict with other people, whether we're debating politics or religions, finances or work problems, parenting issues or strong opinions on any topic—the other person is almost always afraid of something—and that fear drives them (and us) to hold or defend a certain position:

A father of four is afraid that his family will lose their healthcare.

A man who has experienced religious discrimination is afraid of others experiencing the same.

A member of our family is afraid they're not being heard.

A teenager is afraid of the damage climate change is doing to the planet.

A couple is afraid their jobs will be moved overseas.

An elderly woman is afraid she will be forgotten.

These fears are not unfounded. They are not necessarily false stories. Many times they are quite true. The false story is what we tell ourselves about these threats, the way they shape us and change our behavior. Is our response appropriately proportioned to the threat? Where is bad information amplifying our fear?

People's fears or the false stories will manifest in the politicians they support, their religious beliefs they hold, the way they respond to adversity. Part of the job of being loving human beings, is trying to uncover people's fears and validate them because no one is at their best when they're terrified.

False stories are inherited, handed down to us by those who raised us.

They are taught.

They are given to us by people who want us to imagine they are true.

Pastors, politicians, partisan media. They want to control feat narrative.

Some false stories are curated by us.

When you encounter another person's fears, you're slamming into their back story, their personal mythology, a long individual history.

Sometimes we're trying to overcome years or even decades of words spoken into people.

Sometimes we're trying to overcome their parents or pastors or politicians.

Sometimes we're even having to overcome their God.

"Of all the liars in the world, sometimes the worst are our own fears." — Rudyard Kipling

If we look for the false stories and work to diffuse them, we can be effective in being in relationships, have conversations about difficult topics, and understanding them—not agreeing with them. That's what I want to make sure you hear during our time together:

IMPORTANT: You don't need to like everyone or agree with everyone. You can show compassion and still end with irreconcilable differences. Remember, we're not necessarily trying to get people to agree with us, but to give them differing information or a better story—and take away their phantom fear.

Fear of what is happening (real fear), seems to be happening (imagined fear), may happen (anticipatory fear) are always at play.

Warning: People will cling to their false stories simply because they are comfortable. Many times, people's fears are well-founded (or at least they make sense given their experiences and false stories) but often those fears are based on a false story: a set of believed circumstances or accepted truths that aren't always accurate, and in our interactions with them we might be able to give them a perspective that they don't have—not to win an argument or change their minds, but to take away their fear.

But the bottom line is, whether we feel people's fears are justified or not, the net result is the same on them, and our empathy-centered living should consider that.

1:42 Barriers to Empathy:

2) ANGER

A family member I hadn't seen in a few years texted me, seemingly out of the blue:

"You're coming across as really angry, lately." he said. "Good," I replied immediately. "I was afraid I wasn't communicating clearly." Not properly appreciating my sarcasm in the spirit in which it was offered, he continued sternly, "I feel sorry for you, for all that anger—especially a Christian." "Don't feel sorry for me," I said, "I know why I'm angry and I think it's worth it."

Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are. - Augustine of Hippo:

I have a running argument with myself. I am of two minds when it comes to anger. One on hand, I have fully embraced my anger and felt it propelling me to respond to injustice, and on the other hand, I have felt and seen its destructive capabilities firsthand; those times in my life when it was a liability, a trouble starter, a relationship killer. I know there is a tension there and that we all sit in the middle of that tension every single day. I feel that tension in my own life.

Question: Is there such a thing as helpful anger?

I know there is a tension there and that we all sit in the middle of that tension every single day. I feel that tension in my own life.

Anger tends to get a bad rap, historically speaking. In fact, that's often the way people dismiss us if they don't like what we have to say: you're so angry.

But as we think about being compassionate people, it's important to clarify that anger and empathy aren't mutually exclusive; that in fact, sometimes what appears to be the former is actually a profound prompt by the latter. In other words, it is precisely because of the depth of our feelings that we feel this internal unrest. Many times, anger is that holy discontent that internally disrupts us to the point of action. Yes, the spiritual traditions and the great thinkers before us, all rightly warn against the potential toxicity of unhealthy, cultivated anger.

I was looking for a defense of anger and I was running into roadblocks:

Buddha said: Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.

Albert Einstein wrote: Anger dwells only in the bosom of fools.

Plato said: There are two things a person should never be angry at, what they can help, and what they cannot.

Jesus taught: But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

And, actress Betty White said, "Anger tears me up inside: my own or someone else's."

I may be able to argue with Gandhi, Buddha, and Einstein—but I'm not going up against Betty White. I was running into a roadblock on the positive aspects of anger. As a fairly fiery spirit prone to passionate responses to the world, this kind of wise consensus against anger, well it

really pisses me off.

However, the Greek philosopher Aristotle offers up a different way of thinking about the redemptive possibilities of anger, writing:

‘Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.’

So, the right person—right degree—right time—right purpose—right way,

The object, level, timing, purpose, and manner of my anger matter.

These who, how much, now, why, how questions, can give us a really useful filter for assessing the appropriate nature of our outrage, and a productive expression of it (which is inherently spiritual.) Because it can be difficult to gauge such things, can't it? motion clouds when we need clarity.

Let's think about some healthy anger practices:

1) Prepare in advance before we enter into the trenches.

The best time to think about healthy ways to process our anger is not when we're angry. We do better when we're at war if we've prepared in peace time.

2) We need to invite time into our initial anger.

Anger is a natural, almost involuntary response. It is this combustible moment where we find ourselves passionately perturbed—and this works the same whether the moment or person is deserving or not. We really can't prevent this sort of emotional ignition, but we are not defined by that moment itself. If we allow some time to pass, even a few seconds, we are able to sift the situation, to decide if it merits our outrage, and to craft a productive response—or respond in a destructive way.

3) Transform our anger into something else.

Anger as a catalytic moment is often necessary, moving us from complacency or ignorance and propelling us into movement. We've seen the virtue of outrage in this Resistance movement over the past few months. That doesn't happen without anger. But as a cultivated condition, anger is almost always toxic. If we sit with that rage too long and nurture it too intently without transferring it, it slowly begins to pollute us, seeping into our bloodstreams and contaminating the compassionate hearts that caused us to be angry in the first place. Little by little, we become used to a posture of irritability and defiance. Gradually we can become more about the fight itself than about anything or anyone we're fighting for: We can begin to live angry.

Religious people tend to justify themselves with the phrase righteous anger, which I'd just as soon jettison, because the truth is whether you're conservative or progressive, everyone believes their anger is righteous, their cause is just, their motives are pure (I know I usually do.) But if there's any kind of anger people of faith, morality, and conscience should aspire to it is redemptive anger, focusing on what results from our efforts and our activism: Do they bring justice, equity, wholeness? Are more people heard and seen and respected in their wake? Is diversity nurtured or assailed?

Is compassion for vulnerable or marginalized people the product of that anger?

Come to think of it, the word anger may be the problem altogether, since it's gotten some pretty bad PR over the past few million years. I suggest we replace anger with ferocity: the way a family dog fiercely defends a small child from a coyote, the way a parent fiercely defends their spouse if there's a fire, the way my wife fiercely defends me when there's a spider in the bathtub. Ferocity for humanity is what birthed the civil rights movement, women's movement, the fight for LGBTQ equality, and it's what has sustained decent Americans over the past four years. And ferocity for human beings made in the image of God was the fuel for Jesus turning over the tables and calling out the religious leaders and declaring solidarity with the poor and allowing himself to be executed. I think that's an underappreciated part of my faith tradition that tends not to get featured in needlepoints and memes: righteous ticked-offness; his passionate objections to seeing the powerful preying upon the vulnerable, watching the religious

hypocrites pollute the system, witnessing the well-fed living close fistled toward the hungry.

You can't have this passionate response to the world without anger as its initial propellant. This ferocity for humanity will always be interpreted negatively by those seeking to do damage to humanity. It will always be labeled angry and hateful by people who benefit from inequity and injustice—and religious people on the opposite side of our convictions will always attempt to shame us into silence in the name of Jesus they probably would have had a real problem with. The beautiful collective anger of good people is actually the antidote to hateful religion. That not-rightness is what propels us into the lives of other people in sacrificial acts of love.

Question: Where and when do you feel this “holy ferocity” I’m talking about? What people or causes tend to illicit that passionate response from you? We cannot afford to grow so tired or complacent or apathetic that we lose our ability to be outraged. I think we have to hold on to our intolerance to injustice because it comes from a source that will tether us to other people. It propels us into the places where the least live. When you take certain medications for a long time, you can eventually build up tolerance to it. It no longer works. We can't build up a tolerance to inhumanity, which is incredibly easy right now because we see so much of it. Focus on those with less privilege and less of a voice. That is what is happening right now. We are feeling this profound discomfort because we are fiercely defending lives from danger.

This Ferocity for humanity will always be interpreted negatively by those seeking to do damage to it. It will often be labeled angry and hateful by people opposing you.

I am OK being labeled angry: I'm just going to keep making sure my anger is at the right person—right degree—right time—right purpose—right way. Stay angry, good people: Hold on to your ferocity for humanity.

And honestly, you may not be feeling anger at all, but something deeper.

In Minnesota a woman stopped me in the lobby of a church where I was giving a talk and asked if she could speak with me for a second. I said, sure. She started crying almost immediately and said, “I'm just so angry all the time. I hate how angry I am.” I said to her.

That's probably partly true. Yes, you're angry but you might be something more than that. Maybe you're grieving. Maybe you're in mourning right now." She said, "Wow, I never thought of it that way, but that's it. This is grief. I feel like I've lost so many people. Grief and anger can often look the same from the outside. If we don't know what's happening inside, we can easily mistake one for the other.

Empatheology 2) Be mindful of the grief we all carry.

Grief and anger can often look the same from the outside. We'll talk about anger later in our gatherings, but we'll focus on grief now. If we don't know what's happening inside, we can easily mistake one for the other. Sometimes it seems simply like unmerited rage, but it's really the frustration the heart feels when it finds itself in trauma that it can't make any sense of. The lashing out, is the pressure of our helplessness needing a release. I often think we are misinterpreted as angry when we are really mourning.

I don't know why you're here today, but I imagine you're here because you're grieving something.

I wonder what you're grieving the loss of these days.

It may be your idea of God or country or family.

It maybe your belief in the goodness of people.

It may be a relationship with someone you once felt fully at home around.

It may be your sense of optimism about the future.

It may be the lightness you used to feel when you woke up in the morning.

It may be every single one of these things, and more that you can't quite name right now.

Anger isn't what you afflicted with it, it's just a symptom of the heart sickness that is your grief.

8 billion funerals.

Whatever you feel you're attending the funeral of, realize that this will not always leave you at your best. You might be more impatient with people, more prone to angry outbursts, more emotionally untethered. And yes, while you don't want to allow this grief to become toxic and make you only capable of rage—you also need to cut yourself some slack. Have some mercy

on yourself, because you (like all people in mourning) deserve that gentleness. Grief is draining

it manifests itself in many ways.

You may recognize some of the symptoms in you: irritability, impatience, physical illness, eating emotionally, addictive behavior, the inability to be present to the people who love you, obsession with social media, fixated on of the upside-downness of it all.

You're here because you've experienced a relational fracture or a disconnection—so have the people you encounter.

And in some way, you are likely grieving an old story of a person or a country or a spiritual belief: the one you had of the person or the one of your old connection. We often want the old story back, but that old story was usually based on information we didn't have before and now we need to adjust to the new story, which takes some work. Yes, you may be here talking about being a kind person because of a larger concern about "humanity" out there, about a voting block or political party or a religious group—but likely you have names and faces and stories for the issue. So, this grieving it's global, it's personal.

And the question for many of us is, what do we do know? What is the way forward? What do we do with this deep and prolonged grieving?

How do we respond to loss when death comes? What do we do? We keep living just with a different lens. We see differently.

The loss or the perceived loss of people around us.

This is also something to remember, as we live alongside people, as we stare at them through smart phone screens, as we pass them on the street, as we rub shoulders with them at work, as sit across from them at the kitchen: many people are grieving right now too.

They may not be dressed in black or have a band around their arm that gives them away, but their loss is crippling and their wounds are fresh, and they may respond in ways that seem to us like reckless anger—when in reality, they too are in mourning.

Yes, you might be angry, but that isn't the bigger story here.

You're simply grieving something that has died.

Go easy on yourself.

Barriers to Empathy:

Loneliness/Isolation

3) Actively confront the epidemic of loneliness.

RELATIONSHIP AND COMMUNITY

The reason we go to the movies or read a book or look at artwork or listen to music—is to see something of ourselves reflected back at us, to feel connected to other people, to find affinity in the experience of being human.

And the reason we create and express ourselves, is to make that kind of connection in the opposite direction: to say to the world: here is my story. Knowing we are part of a shared story is often what tethers us to hope when difficulty comes. That shared story is called community and community is the antidote to one of the greatest sicknesses we have here: loneliness.

*We are always fighting the feeling that we are alone—in our worries, our values, our fears; that we are the last of an endangered species, that no one feels what we feel or cares about what we care about—especially when we are surrounded by so much discord, so many opposing opinions, so much tribalism.

Most of us wade into crowds of strangers every day on social media hoping to find people who see something we see, who are outraged by something we're outraged by, someone who is asking a question we are asking. Ultimately, we want to know, I'm not alone and I'm not crazy and if I'm crazy I'm in really good company. We want to be seen.

“You made me feel visible.”

I imagine part of the reason you're here is that you wanted to be in a community of like-hearted people: to gather with human beings who care about the world in the ways that you do and I imagine it is a help to know that you have your people, that you are visible.

(I retold a story from the book about a group gathering with me at a retreat, and a woman bursting through the door yelling “My people!”)

As we think about the need for the pull of community, we can begin to understand what motivates us and what motivates other people: who can so many people fall in line with hateful movements or organizations? How do so many claim faith in a God of love and yet exist in communities that seem anything but loving?

When the pandemic began, it exacerbated a problem that was already present: disconnection. We know that in general, this pulling away has been happening for a while, even as online community has grown exponentially. We've seen the evidence: people texting instead of calling one another, families spending less time eating dinner together, people less aware of their neighbors, human beings with less opportunities for meaningful connection with people around them. The pandemic introduced forced geographic distance in addition to emotional distance—and we have an epidemic of loneliness, which is why story-sharing and community-building is so critical.

Loneliness is often at the heart of despair and relationships make us feel less alone, community makes us feel less alone. One of the goals of loving human beings is the genuine desire to make people feel less alone.

Human beings want to be known. They want to be heard.

I do. You do. And here's a secret:

So do the people we don't like.

So do the people we despise.

So do the people whose politics make our blood boil.

So do people who join cults of personality that damage even them.

Billions of people are all here together—and terrified of being alone.

That's a recurring truth that we'll want to hold onto during this study and beyond it: no one is immune from the collateral damage of being human, as uncaring as they seem, as insensitive as we think they are, as callous as they may appear from the outside. They are fighting the fear of being alone.

A life oriented toward empathy acknowledges the universal suffering out there and makes that suffering central: the fear, loneliness. We see behavior and confront words and actions and we debate opinions and we call out injustices—but we understand that there is an invisible place of origin of those visible things that we need to consider.

So, today be mindful of the epidemic of loneliness out there, about the fact that no one is immune from the painful collateral damage of being human.

Reflection/Conversation prompts:

Where do you see fear as a barrier to empathy, either generally/from a distance, or personally in your life and work? How might you uncover and diffuse the false stories at play in those spaces/relationships?

We explored the relationship between anger and grief, that we often mistake the latter for the former. As we addressed the universal grieving in the world, where did your thoughts go? How are you noticing and experiencing loss?

As we think about isolation and loneliness as places that serve as barriers to empathetic exchanges, what are you thinking about possible solutions to dismantle those relational barriers, either individually or collectively?

How do your spiritual/moral convictions inform your perspective on fear, grief, and loneliness?

As you reflect on the forces of fear, anger, grief, and loneliness, where do you feel the most

challenged personally?

What challenges have you faced in these areas?

What growth have you seen?

Empatheology 4) Be a story-learner.

We are a product of our stories and your story can be your greatest teacher if it gets a little help. Our stories all have a specific geography, a precise place and time where we find ourselves—a neighborhood where we have our assumptions built and our prejudices formed and our blind spots created. It's also where we build relationships and impact lives and engage the brokenness.

People feel the divide: We are a divided nation. I imagine you feel it. But the divide isn't the one we think it is. This divide isn't a black vs white divide. It isn't a Republican vs Democrat divide. It isn't progressive Christians vs. Conservative Christians.

This is a vision divide — a difference in how we see ourselves and our world and other people and our resources. The vision divide is along the lines of empathy and sustenance. The people of compassion and those who lack empathy. It is people who live with open hands and those with clenched fists. It is those who see this world and opportunity and resource as abundance—and those who live in lack—a zero sum game, someone else's gain is my loss. It is human beings who see that we are one interdependent community, and human beings who only know America First. It is love and it is fear.

The fundamental mistake we make in our interpersonal conflicts, is thinking that we really know people: that we fully understand not only what they think and feel at any given moment, but why they feel that—but that's almost never true. With every single person we interact with, we are almost always dealing with incomplete information at the time. We encounter some people from a great distance on social media, where we see only what they choose to share: their very selective, edited, filtered honesty—and we use that to determine a lot about their feelings and motives.

People think they know me because they've read blog posts or a book. They have a limited window. Maybe you feel that way. I'm sorry to disappoint you. You're probably slightly wrong. I've edited this video a hundred times so you'll see what I want you to see. It doesn't matter how many posts or books someone reads; they could read them all and still only be getting 100 percent to what I choose to share. That's why story matters because we are all selectively sharing out there, and the more accurate stories we get the better treat people.

Others, we may know a bit better than social media, either from work or the neighborhood or from school or church, where we have a deeper and more extended experience of them, but still far from complete. Most of us are putting up the best version of ourselves to stay in community, be successful, be liked. We aren't necessarily lying, but we're sure showing the good stuff. **And even the people we have the greatest proximity to and intimacy with, those we live with and know the most about—we don't know everything about.** In fact, usually the people we live with and spend the most time around are the people we stop being curious about. In every case, a posture of curiosity will lead you to a more empathetic response. You won't necessarily like them more, but you will more accurately see them. When you remain in a posture of curiosity it's impossible to pass judgment on a person because you are always aware you might not have the whole picture.

The first step in an empathy-based life, is admitting when we are having a disagreement or disconnection with someone, "I don't know this person as well as I could"—and then, figuring out how to learn something more in order to solve the relational disconnect.

I'll never forget a Thursday afternoon in art school three decades ago. We were about to draw a still-life: a collection of ordinary objects laid out across a table. As we prepared to capture the rather mundane assortment of pottery and fruit sprawled over some simple fabric, our professor said we needed to put our pencils away first. He said, "The job of the artist is to show people the beauty in ordinary things that they no longer see—and to do that you have to become a student of what you draw: to learn as much you can from your subject: to look at the way it reflects light, to notice its texture, its weight; to linger and be curious. Then, after you've really studied it, you can begin to try and capture for others, something about it.

Likewise, if we want to be better able to navigate differences, we have to become students of the people we disagree with; to realize that they are unique and complex, and that we have something to learn about them. Instead of putting our energies into debating or criticizing people, if we can first cultivate curiosity about them, we will stay open to understanding them. What curiosity does, is acknowledge those alternative lenses the other person sees through, and it says to the person across from us: Let me try on your lenses and see what you see. That's the biggest change we can make in the interpersonal dynamic. Instead of just trying to get people to agree to see how we see things, we can make sure we better understand what they see. We don't come with an agenda to convert but to know them. Conversion tends to make us feel like we're winning but it rarely leaves us very empathetic about the other person.

Most of the time our interpersonal conflicts break down over a lack of information or an assumption?

Ways to be a student of other people:

- 1) Ask a question you think you know the answer to.
- 2) Listen more intentionally.
- 3) Try to remove your lenses: the filters you have regarding that person or the issue.
- 4) Be willing to be wrong.

5) Be mindful of your lenses

4-D Movie story

The lenses through which we view the world matter. As we live in community alongside disparate people, it's tempting to imagine that everyone sees things as we do, that their filters match our own, that we are having a similar experience of the same planet, the same country, the same religion, even the same Jesus. But the truth is, we each have incredibly specific story- shaped lenses that subjectively inform and color and alter life in front of us. You carry

yours with you into the places you live and work and navigate on your phone (even as you encounter these words)—which is why spirituality and politics are both so messy and fraught with discord: because 8 billion separate sacred, beloved stories are colliding every day. That's a ton of relational friction to sustain, whether we're deeply religious, decidedly undecided, or passionately antireligion.

And for those of us who *do* consider ourselves believers in some capacity, we face a fundamental problem in thinking and talking about religion: we all make “God” either slightly or substantially in our own image. This subjective and self-referential picture of the Divine is formed by the homes and families in which we were raised, the teachers we had, the faith communities we did or didn't grow up in, our individual life experiences, our personality types, and even our very physicality. These differences alter the way in which we view the world as it relates to spiritual things and to the working theology we practice. Those of us who have engaged Christianity either directly or peripherally all sift the words and the life of Jesus for those parts of them that seem to reflect our passions, confirm our prejudices, ratify our politics, and echo the story we tell ourselves. Because those lenses have shaped the Gospel stories we've read and have had preached to us, we tend to worship a God of Confirmation Bias. Every person claiming to be a Christian or simply aspiring to the teachings of Jesus has a highly personalized, greatly customized, individually constructed, and ultimately incomplete Jesus.

There are as many Jesuses in this world as there are people claiming belief in him, as many as there are Christians reading this book. Even when we use the Bible as our apparent place of commonality, we bring our extremely precise selves to that singular story and create an entirely unique take on the narrative that tends to correspond with our own.

This is true of every possible area of our lives, not just the obvious culture-war issues. We Christians can't help but read the Gospels so they skew our way, which is why, in the stories we encounter there, we almost always imagine that we're Jesus—or at the very least, that we're the earnest, faithful disciples alongside him and never the self-righteous religious frauds whose hypocrisy he's condemning. We like to picture ourselves as the Good Samaritan rescuing the wounded man on the roadside—not those callous people walking by. We're always the persecuted woman, never the chastised stone-throwers.³ We're always like Jesus and never a jerk. This bias toward ourselves is a huge obstacle, and it impacts us greatly that

we have such disparate images of God or Jesus, because if we are serious about living our faith, this image of God or portrait of Jesus forms the primary lens through which we view everything: our relationships, the environment, the church, equality, health care, politics, parenting—the way we experience this life.

If having a personalized Jesus is a challenge to each of us individually as we relate to one another, it's even more difficult if we're going to try to live in spiritual community locally and as part of the bigger Church in the world. If a community bears the name "Christian"—whether it's five of us or fifty of us or five hundred or five thousand—we have to somehow figure out which version of Jesus we are going to emulate in the world together, which understanding of God we are going to perpetuate together. That's the mess we're in not just in this room but in denominations across America. In many local churches, the Black Lives Matter movement in response to police brutality, the separation of families at our southern border, and the deaths in the wake of this pandemic have turned the already present hairline fractures into compound breaks that simply can no longer be denied. We've had to reckon with other people's lenses and other people's Jesuses and to admit the disconnect.

It's funny how the Almighty's prejudices and biases end up mirroring our own, how similarly petty and vindictive the God in our heads becomes. We might say that we believe in grace as an abstract religious concept, but when the rubber meets the road and we encounter people who boil our blood and draw our disdain and trigger our sensitivities, we (like Jonah) resist accepting them for fear that this will mean they're getting away with something. We withhold community and inclusion from them, not because we really believe God would do this, but because we want to punish them for not meeting our standards, retaliating through distance or disconnection. We ironically push people away to show them how they failed to be as loving as we are. In the Gospel stories, the religious leaders were often similarly outraged when Jesus' compassion eclipsed their own: when the lepers, beggars, nonbelievers, screwups, and sinners received the same embrace and the same regard that the "good and righteous people" did. It was their desire to hoard blessing and withhold mercy that rendered them unable to practice a bigger love than they were comfortable with.

(Susan's Sunday group) "I just don't know why God had to make other races."

Susan's encounter reminds us how powerful our own origin stories are, how they shape the way we see the world and imagine God and craft our biases. The woman across from Susan was genuinely grieving the fractures she could see from where she was, she was deeply troubled at the visible divisions—but she was viewing them through lenses that distorted the whys of their existence. She wasn't a bad person; she was a good person with a bad story.

Many of us came out of a bad or faulty story of some kind. This is why Susan's investment in those draining, bombastic Sunday afternoons is both costly and priceless. Without her steadfast presence and her genuine desire to learn why someone believes differently than she does, she isn't there at that table when a sixty-five year-old woman afflicted with privilege begins to recognize her symptoms, when she is vulnerable enough to name her grief and to let down her battle posture long enough to really listen, because she trusts the person across from her to see her as more than a stereotype. I think that's the messy, precarious spot where we can really love our neighbor even if we don't particularly like them—or like them but despise something they believe in.

Important: Learning someone's story doesn't mean consenting to the beliefs or actions that story has yielded.

Many Christians have been weaned on a bad story. Their God is actually too small. In many ways, white Evangelicalism is built largely on an inequitable theology, on the fraudulent premise that God is a cisgender white guy who was born in America, raised Christian, and votes Republican.

With this as its operating system, it is going to intentionally and subconsciously perpetuate injustice against those who don't fit such narrow descriptions, and cause the Church to resist changes that bring balance, to a world that has been tipped in their favor for thousands of years. It renders people unable to see clearly because seeing would challenge their entire God story.

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professor said we needed to put our pencils away first. He said, “The job of the artist is to show people the beauty in ordinary things that they no longer see—and to do that you have to become a student of what you draw: to learn as much you can from your subject: to look at the way it reflects light, to notice its texture, its weight; to linger and be curious. Then, after you’ve really studied it, you can begin to try and capture for others, something about it.

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EMPATHEOLOGY:

- 1 Look for the fears and the false stories.**
- 2. Be mindful of the universal grieving.**
- 3. Confront the epidemic of loneliness.**
- 4. Be a story-learner.**
- 5. Be mindful of your lenses.**

Reflection/Conversation Prompt:

When you remind through your story, where and when have you felt difficulty being fully seen? Where and when did you “feel visible” finding acceptance as you were?

Looking back, where do you think your primary lenses regarding empathy, seeing suffering, being a helper have been formed? What experiences have allowed you to see differently or be surprised?

Another barrier to empathy I want to talk to you about is fatigue: physical, emotional, spiritual.

Remember, there is physical and emotional subtraction to living and working with empathy, so we want to do as much as we can to guard ourselves.

4) FATIGUE

We can avoid fatigue by continually asking: “WHAT IS MINE TO CARRY?”

Here is what I might call a Sustainable Compassion Toolbox that may help you with the collateral damage of giving a damn:

These are essential expressions of self-compassion.

1. Engage and withdraw.

In addition to your activism, take time for “inactivism” Withdraw into whatever allows you to breathe and recalibrate: silence, solitude, nature, prayer, meditation.

2. Wisely wield social media.

Get on social media: Find tribes of affinity be informed, look for ways to perpetuate goodness by using your voice.

Get off social media: Have the fears right sized by not having them artificially multiplied or enlarged.

3. Practice strategic levity.

Intentionally spend time with people, read things, or watch things that make you laugh. That laughter is empowering. It helps you remember that as difficult as things may be, if you can laugh you haven't been fully overcome.

4. Get in the body.

Do something that intentionally gets you out of your head: walking, exercising, playing a sport, playing with your dog or grandchildren. Sweat, allow your blood to follow, and allow your body to take the focus of your mind.

5. Follow your muse.

Creativity allows us to tap into our humanity and to connect to the humanity of others. It is restorative and enriching in ways few other things are. Whether you paint or make music or garden or scrapbook or build things or bake, stay connected to the source of what inspires you.

6. Take a hope inventory.

Hope is an aspirational orientation. It helps propel us into days we wouldn't otherwise walk into. It gives us reason on the horizon to keep going. It is future focused.

7. Cultivate gratitude.

Unlike hope, gratitude is present focused. It allows us to see what is worth celebrating even if nothing changes.

8. Know who you aren't.

We need to have the humility to admit and respect our limits. Yes, you are a once-in-history, never-to-be-repeated creation with gifts and talents and experiences that no one has ever had but you are finite in your emotional and physical resources.

9. Share the load.

Community is medicinal. In our tribes of affinity we can find strength and be lifted and be able to not feel we are carrying the weight of the world alone.

10. Do daily maintenance. Repeat.

It's easy to neglect the small, elemental, yet critical daily maintenance of my physical and emotional health.

neglecting the small, elemental, yet critical daily maintenance of my physical and emotional health.

I made incremental changes in as many areas as I could. I made sleep a priority, I paid attention to hydrating, I exercised more, I started eating healthier, I got more organized, I limited my social media intake, I put my schedule on a diet.

The key here is to get simple wins and build momentum through repetition.

Questions:

When thinking about the simple, elemental strategies list we just went over for sustainable compassion, where have you noticed a lack or gap in your daily practices where you could benefit from greater investment?

Is there a practice or rhythm that you feel is important that wasn't among the list shared?

We heard the difference between gratitude and hope, with the former being present-focused and the other being future-focused. Do you tend to have more difficulty with gratitude or hope lately?

You are the greatest resource you have and needs it.

"It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet, I keep them because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

Anne Frank

We will save the world in the small, close, here, now, and doable.

Proximity and agency

You can't heal every trauma in the people in your path.

You can't change every political outcome.

You can't undo every piece of legislation.

You can't help everyone see the realities of their privilege.

You can't show every local church reflect the character of Jesus.

You can't stop every LGBTQ person from ending their lives because of the words spoken into

them.

You can't let every person who feels invisible feel heard.

You can't shout out the voice of every hateful preacher.

Take care of yourself so that you are in this for the long haul and attending to the wounds of the world with as little collateral damage as possible.

Then, with your gifts and your talents and your position and your privilege and your platform and your resources, in the here, now, small, close, and doable—

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”

FRED ROGERS