

Disruptive Empathy

Luke 10:25-37

Fourth Sunday in Lent, (March 30) 2025

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A consistent characteristic of those who resisted Nazism or rescued its victims was their acknowledgement of relationship, both to what was happening around them and to the victims.

-Victoria J. Barnett

Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust

A time comes when silence is betrayal.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

In case you haven't heard, there is a new sin out there that we must guard against – the sin of empathy. And apparently, it's not just a sin, it is also a threat to our entire western civilization.

A new book has created much of the buzz about empathy, especially among Right-Wingers, including and most especially Christian nationalists. The book is *The Sin of Empathy* by Joe Rigney, just published a month ago, in which he tells the reader that empathy “often leads to cowardice” and “frequently leads to brazen malice and cruelty.” Rigney teaches theology at New St. Andrews College and is an associate pastor under Doug Wilson at

Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. Both Wilson and Christ Church have been in the news for, among other things, their advocacy of Christian nationalism and reconstructionism.

Of course, the richest person in the world, Elon Musk, which he mistakes for making him the smartest person in the world, has gotten in on the anti-empathy tirade. On a recent appearance on the Joe Rogan podcast, while they were discussing the dangers of immigration, immigrant Musk described empathy as the “fundamental weakness of Western civilization” and expressed concern about “weaponized empathy” or, as he also describes it, “the empathy exploit.”

Musk’s weaponized empathy or empathy exploit is like what Rigney calls “untethered empathy,” which he means as a kind of manipulation and an “excess of compassion, when our identification with and sharing of the emotions of others overwhelms our minds and sweeps us off our feet.” For Rigney and many of the Right-Wing Christian nationalists, virtue is to resist untethered empathy, resist too much compassion, and keep it all tethered to truth and reality.

The standard definition of empathy is the capacity and activity of understanding the experience of the other. Empathy is an act of the imagination in which we willingly put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, someone else’s skin and place, and we ask ourselves, “What does it feel like to be...?” It has to do with the ability to imaginatively enter the experience of someone else, to enter their story. It is partly why reading fiction is

important. It is why going to the theatre is important or going to movies. Reading fiction, theatre, or movies help us enter someone else's story, feel what they feel, see what they see. That's empathy.

The Bible translates empathy as "compassion" which means, "to suffer with." In Hebrew, the word for "compassion" is rooted in the word for "womb." The old word, "pity" is often used as a synonym for compassion. Furthermore, the word sympathy is not far from it. If empathy and compassion are about feeling and suffering "with," sympathy is feeling "for" and they're all connected to that all-inclusive, holistic word, love.

In the New Testament, when Jesus gives us what's called the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," he was talking about empathy. Wendell Berry has paraphrased the Golden Rule: "Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you." Empathy knows we all live upstream or downstream from someone else. Empathy knows we're all connected.

Recently, my dear friend Steve Shoemaker reminded me of a line from the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*. The main character, an aging professor of history in the decade of the 1970s, is commenting on life in America. He says most people today have undergone an "empathectomy," their empathy surgically removed.

If it was true fifty years ago, it is even more true today, and no one is

guilty than the White evangelical church demonstrating extraordinary antagonism toward immigrants coming to America — and this from a people whose most repeated command from our Old Testament is to care for the widows, orphans, and strangers (or immigrants).

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson for today from Luke 10, one of the two most important parables from Jesus. A smart, lawyer, politician comes to Jesus and asks, “How can I get saved?” And Jesus says, “What’s written in God’s Word? What does the Bible say?”

This intelligent fellow, knows his Bible, says, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence — and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.”

This is the bottom-line, loving God, and loving your neighbor as yourself, so much so that that it all becomes one love. Loving God, loving neighbor, and loving self are all connected. At least, that’s the calling if we are to be God’s people. And Jesus responds, “Good answer. Do this and you’ll have Life. You’ll be saved.”

This young lawyer responded, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor?’ Do you mean deserving neighbors or undeserving neighbors? Do you mean neighbors in a generic sense or in a specific sense? Does it mean only those who live on my side of the border? Is my neighbor those who look like me, think like me, believe and vote like me?”

In other words, this young lawyer in Luke is more interested in what

are the boundaries of love. We want to make sure we don't have too much compassion.

He is not interested in love, and certainly not in compassion or empathy. He's interested in a definition that makes neighbor as small and clearly contained as possible.

Wendell Berry has a classic essay called "Two Minds" in which he contrasts the Rational Mind with the Sympathetic Mind. Berry says, "The Rational Mind is motivated by the fear of being misled, of being wrong. Its purpose is to exclude everything that cannot empirically or experimentally be proven by fact. The Sympathetic Mind is motivated by fear of error of a very different kind: the error of carelessness, of being unloving. Its purpose is to be considerate of whatever is present, to leave nothing out." Berry goes on, the Sympathetic minds "impulse is toward wholeness. It is moved by affection for its home place, the local topography, the local memories, and the local creatures. It hates estrangement, dismemberment, and disfigurement. The Rational Mind tolerates all these things 'in pursuit of truth' or in pursuit of money – which, in modern practice, have become nearly the same pursuit" (see Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers*).

The young lawyer here in Luke has a Rational mind. This like what we referred to earlier as being obsessed with being tethered to truth and reality. He's more interested in exclusion and wants the data to support his mindset. Jesus is talking about a Sympathetic mindset and shows us what it looks like by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

So this man was on the road traveling and gets beat up, robbed, and stripped and thrown into the ditch, left for half-dead. A priest comes by, sees him, but hurries on down the road. Soon thereafter a Levite passes by and like the priest, he too rushes past. Neither stop to help the man in need. Why not?

Dan White writes of his eight-year-old son who has a vivid imagination and wonderful concentration. When the son is working on a project, like his favorite Legos, he is in the zone, says White. One day some friends stopped by unannounced for a brief visit. Part of the family visiting was an eight-year-old girl. White's son soon came rushing through the room looking for a missing Lego piece that was essential to his project going on in another room. White paused to introduce his son to the visiting girl so they would meet, and he would include her. But the boy rushed by barely saying hello. The little girl looked up at her mom distressed that she was being ignored.

Later that night Dan White said to his son, "Why did you ignore the girl this afternoon?" The boy said, "Dad, I didn't ignore her. I just had big stuff to do" (see Dan White Jr. *Subterranean: Why the Future of the Church is Rootedness*, p. 24).

Did the priest and the Levite ignore the man in the ditch because they had big stuff to do?

Being in a hurry for whatever reason is a major issue for all of us. We

have so much to do, and much of it is good stuff for good causes, or even big stuff for big causes, and we have only limited time.

How much does our busy lives get in the way of what we say we believe?

Perhaps the Priest and the Levite were afraid? Were they afraid that the guy in the ditch was a ruse to lure them over and then the rest of the gang of robbers would attack them? Or were they fearful of breaking their religious “holiness codes” or “ritual purity” laws? For ancient Judaism, these very devout and serious believers were to be holy and set apart just as God was set apart and holy. That meant all kinds of codes, laws, and guidelines to keep oneself pure and undefiled.

We might think that much of that ritualistic and religious purity stuff is ridiculous by our modern standards but there are plenty of us who are fear-filled of mixing with the wrong kind of people. Just wrong example: we don’t want our children mixed in with those poor-performing kids in low-performing schools.

Nowadays we build walls, hurry by the man in the ditch, or deport him, because we might have too much compassion or untethered empathy, and my heavens, we certainly don’t want that.

Along comes a Samaritan. Samaritans, considered racially impure by Jews, sees the man in the ditch.

Martin Luther King, famously said about this parable, it is possible that the Priest and the Levite ask themselves, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” This would be what we called earlier, keeping empathy tethered to truth and reality. Not overdoing this compassion thing. I mean, after all, this could be manipulation, it could be guilt-producing, or it could even be a trap. Maybe the man in the ditch did something to provoke the attack?

Dr. King says that perhaps the Samaritan asks different questions. Maybe the Samaritan asks, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

The Samaritan is beginning to actively use his imagination to feel for the man – sympathy. Which is the first step. He then moves from sympathy to empathy. He sees and he stops. But not only does he stop but he gets into the ditch with the man.

This is why this parable is called a microcosm of the gospel. When we were in the ditch, God in Christ came and got in the ditch with us, empathized with us, and redeemed us out of the ditch. Rather than set apart and holy, this God in Jesus gets in with us. We call it the incarnation. God in Jesus became human. The Samaritan, and Jesus, chose empathy and compassion over purity, over being too busy, over fear, over being concerned with truth and reality. For the Samaritan and Jesus rather than tethering empathy to truth and reality, it is reversed so that truth and reality is tethered to empathy.

The gospel says when humanity, when we, and our world are stuck in the ditch and we cannot get out on our own, what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John call the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, intervenes, and intrudes in our ditch.

In a society that seems consumed by fear and suspicion and anger. One that is focused upon self to the exclusion of God and neighbor, here is the call of Jesus to dissent. Our calling is not to wave flags, build walls, or get our guns for an invasion, the call is to get in the ditch. To love the Lord our God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves is to get in the ditch. There is no truth without getting in the ditch and there are no Ten Commandments without getting in the ditch. There is no gospel without getting in the ditch.

Holocaust scholar Victoria Barnett, in her important book, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, says that when individuals stay within themselves, see morality in terms of their individual lives, their range of vision becomes restricted. She writes that bystanders during the Holocaust were “centered on themselves and their own needs, while rescuers had a sense of compassion for others and felt a responsibility for them. She wrote, “acts of compassion connect *everyone* involved in a new way, and thus alter the very dynamics of society” (p. 172-173).

Jesus says the Samaritan saw the man in the ditch, was moved by compassion, got in the ditch, and bandaged the man’s wounds, put him on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and cared for him. Furthermore, he

pulled out his credit card and said to the innkeeper, “You make sure he is taken care of and put all his expenses on this card. And I’ll be back to check on him and settle any other debts.”

This is what French philosopher, Rene Girard calls “disruptive empathy.” It is an empathy that feels with the other, sees that something is wrong, and then does something about it, even at risk to themselves.

Victoria Barnett says it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment a bystander ceases to be a bystander and becomes a participant. Bystanders tend to live their lives as if everything is normal, but disruptive empathy is when bystanders feel connected to the those who are hurting, and it hits the bystander that everything is no longer normal, and you cannot go on as if it is. Barnett writes, “they begin to see everything in a new light: family, work, their options, and the very purpose of their lives” (p. 161).

Disruptive empathy gets involved and says something is wrong and I’m/we’re going to do something about it.

And here is something else. It just takes one small step to see differently, one small step to start making a difference, and one small step that becomes another and another – and soon, others join in, too. Disruptive empathy becomes contagious.

Philip Hallie, writing about the French village of Le Chambon, hiding, and saving Jewish refugees during WWII, said “originality generated originality in others.” He wrote, “The people of Le Chambon did not begin

with a mature readiness to accept refugees.” Pastor Trocme [and the church] “started something, as a battery may start a motor, but did not know when it started what would be the result of his impulse to resist evil, nor had he known exactly how to bring about that result” (*Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, p. 91-92).

We are already beginning to see compassion spreading through Casa Peregrina. Here and there, people hear about it, meet us, and meet our family, and ask, “What can I do?” “I want to be involved.”

It was the winter of 1940, not long after France surrendered to Nazi Germany, and the Vichy fascist government of France took over. In the small village of Le Chambon, Magda Trocme was finishing up putting dishes away, and stoking the fire. The children were already in bed, and her husband, Andre, the local pastor was not yet back from pastoral calls. There was a knock on the door, and Magda looked out the window to see who it might be. In the dim light she could see a woman standing there shivering, dressed much too lightly for the weather. She had sandals on her bare feet standing there in the snow.

She and her husband believed and taught their small church that God abides in the soul of every human being, and one of the signs that someone does not love God is they are always dividing humans into races, classes, and who is “in” and who is “out.”

You hear me talk about Andre and Magda Trocme and the church and village of Le Chambon all the time. I talk about them because they are so important for our time and place. I talk about them because they were exceptional in a time of evil and darkness. I talk about them because they were remarkable by simply practicing hospitality to Jewish refugees when no one else did.

One writer says that it was that cold evening, in the kitchen that a conspiracy of love began.

But to keep it simple: one cold winter evening during very dark times of early World War II, there was a knock at the front door.

And Magda opened the door (see Hanna Schott, *Love in a Time of Hate*, p. 13-14).

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.