

The Sins of Empathy?

Toxic...Pt. 6

We are in a series talking about church culture – is it toxic or is it *Tov*? A church can have right doctrine and look right, but if at its core it is unhealthy, eventually that will come out. Enough pressure will reveal the hidden cracks. And toxic churches wound people and they betray the good news of Jesus Christ. So we have to be on guard. So we spent the first several weeks of the series identifying the warning signs of toxic church cultures – and frankly, toxic church pastors. Because while it is up to all of us to maintain the health of the church, the leader has the ability to poison it faster than anyone else.

But then last week we turned a corner and we began to talk about what a healthy culture looks like and we said there was a particular Hebrew word to capture it. And that word is *Tov*. *Tov* is the Hebrew word for “good” or “goodness” and it is one of the most frequently used words in the Bible. *Tov* describes God’s nature – God *is* good and God only *does* good. And that is God’s design for all of His creation – to be good and to do good.

And yet we discovered that because of the fall of nature, toxicity has entered the picture. Not everything is *tov* as it should be. Including us and including the church. But we should – through the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit – strive for the good, the *tov*, and resist the toxic. And so I closed last week by running through seven specific areas where the church should pursue a *tov* culture.

We’re basing the structure of this series on a book by New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight, “*A Church Called Tov*” and in it he introduces something he called “The Circle of *Tov*”. And I like it, so I shared the overview of it with you last week. If you missed it you can go to the website and find links to both the audio and the video. But in a nutshell, we said that a *Tov* church nurtures empathy, grace, is people-focused, truthful, just, service-oriented and Christlike.

And we aren’t going to take the time to mine down on each of them – that would take us the rest of the year. But for the rest of this month, I do want to focus in on three of them. Starting today with empathy. A *Tov* church will **Nurture Empathy While Resisting a Narcissistic Culture**. And this is an important topic and timely. Because there’s an interesting debate going on over empathy in church circles these days. And it’s good for me to address it.

Recently, *Christianity Today* magazine carried a story about a division in a well-known conservative evangelical megachurch in Minneapolis. This church has a couple of campuses – one downtown (which I visited years ago) and another out in the suburbs. The church was led for three decades by a major evangelical teacher named John Piper who retired in 2013. The churches he led each hired a campus pastor. And the pastor of the downtown campus resigned just a few weeks ago.

Interestingly, in his letter to the congregation he cited cultural concerns as his reason. See if you can pick up some of the key terms we've been using in our series. "If I just resign and pretend that I think everything at Bethlehem is fine, I would be dishonest. Rather, I believe our leadership culture has taken a turn in an unhealthy direction as we try to navigate conflict and division."

What does the conflict and division surround? Specifically, the church found itself divided over issues that are straining a lot of churches – I have had some tough conversations here – issues of racial justice and critical race theory (CRT), the #MeToo movement and the call to believe women, the nature of trauma and abuse, and the issue of refugees, immigrants and other "others".

I said one of the church campuses was in urban Minneapolis, and if you know your news, you'll recall it was urban Minneapolis where George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in May of 2020. And I don't use that term polemically, this last spring, the officer was convicted on three counts - one of "manslaughter" and two of "murder". But anyway, the downtown campus of the church embraced the pain of their neighboring black community. And the suburban campus claimed they went too far.

The elders of the church brought accusations against several of the downtown pastors of creating what they called "a culture of coddling". The resigning pastor responded that, "In a climate of suspicion, compassion can look like coddling." Other accusations had to do with what they called the "sins of empathy". And that's what I want to talk about this morning.

The pastor of the suburban campus wrote an article called "*The Sins of Empathy*" in which he tried to – *badly* in my opinion - emulate C.S. Lewis' style from *The Screwtape Letters* in which a demon writes about their strategy for confusing humans. He writes, "Our armies have fought for decades to twist the Enemy's virtue of compassion into its counterfeit, empathy. Since we introduced the term a century ago, we've steadily taught the humans to regard empathy as an improvement upon compassion or sympathy. Compassion only suffers with another person; empathy suffers in them. It's a total immersion into the pain, sorrow, and suffering of the afflicted."

Is this true? First of all, *is* there a hard difference between the terms empathy, sympathy and compassion? And is it possible that empathy is a trick of the devil to get us so wrapped up in the pain of another that we lose our grasp on reality and truth? Emotional literacy is a topic I've been trying to grow in and so I began to do some research.

I found an article in *Psychology Today* – probably the worldview *opposite* of fundamentalist Christianity – that also claimed “compassion is better than empathy”. The author, a psychology professor at Columbia, writes, “Indeed, *too much empathy* can be debilitating. When we become too distressed about the suffering of others, we don't have the cognitive and emotional resources available to do much to help them.” Well, ok, but throughout the article, the focus was on empathy *out of balance*, not actually the nature of empathy itself.

I wrote my doctoral dissertation of the fallen nature of humanity to be out of balance in a variety of directions. *Of course* there can be “too much empathy”. There can probably be “too much” anything. Just this week, the wife of a dear friend of mine overdosed on antihistamines! She was taking over-the-counter cold and flu medicines plus Tylenol and didn't realize they both had the same ingredient. She's fine, but it gave her some problems with her liver – her skin started turning yellow. You can have “too much” of all kinds of things.

Just because something can be harmful if used improperly, doesn't mean the thing itself is bad – or certainly not “a sin”. You can abuse grace. We all have and we all do. So does that mean grace is a bad thing? Of course not. As one of my favorite preachers is fond of saying, “If no one in my church is abusing grace, I'm probably not preaching on it enough!”

So as I continued to research, I found that the difference between empathy, sympathy and compassion appears to be very subjective. For instance, when it comes to emotional literacy, my go-to trusted source is University of Houston research professor, Brené Brown. She's spent the last two decades studying vulnerability, courage, shame and empathy and applying those lessons to organizational leadership. I just finished one of her leadership books a few months ago.

She is a big fan of empathy. I think she would concur that healthy church cultures would nurture it. She says, “Empathy is one of the linchpins of cultures built on connection and trust.”(*Dare to Lead*,136) And in some ways her definition is the same as the “sins of empathy” guy. Remember he said compassion is suffering *with*, and empathy is suffering *in*. Well Dr. Brown says “Empathy is not connecting to an experience, it's connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience.”(140) It *is* emotional and by design.

In fact, she takes just the opposite view of the *Psychology Today* article, claiming, “Empathy is feeling with people. Sympathies feeling for them. Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection.”(152) She goes on to say that we can think of it like coming upon someone who is in a deep well and they shout from the bottom, “It’s dark and scary down here. I’m overwhelmed.” Sympathy is looking over the edge of the hole and saying, “Yikes, that looks terrible. So sorry.” And walking on.

Empathy on the other hand peers over the edge and says, “I see you. Sit tight.” And then climbs down in to say, “I know what’s it’s like to be in a dark hole. And you don’t have to do it alone.” But Brown says, of course you don’t go down without a way to get back out again. Without boundaries you just wind up with *two* people stuck in a hole and what use is that? Is empathy risky? Of course it is. But so is love. And some things are just worth the risk.

Otherwise we live a disconnected life. Look at the apostle Paul’s words in **1 Corinthians 13:2-3**, “*If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*” Do you see the balance? I can come hard on the “truth” side, but without love I’m nothing. And I can come hard on the “feeling” side, but it’s possible even there to not be operating out of love.

Back in August, Deanna and I attended our biannual denominational conference in Orlando. People asked me how it went and I said, “It was fine. You know, nothing made me really angry.” See I would argue that if denominational politics don’t tick you off from time to time, you’re not really doing it right! But I remember a couple of councils ago when I really was mad. In fact it was probably the most disappointed I’ve ever been in my movement.

I’m ordained with the Assemblies of God denomination. And since 1914 we’ve said that the church has three purposes for existing; evangelism, worship and discipleship. And a few years ago it was proposed that we add a fourth; compassion. And as we sat in the business meeting, I was shocked as people began to come to the microphone to speak *against* compassion.

The fear was – I think in the same strain as the Minneapolis church – that if we emphasized compassion, that would make us somehow too soft. That we could compromise truth. As if compassion could be the enemy of the gospel. Have you ever had a doctor come to you with a dilemma, “Well we can treat you with compassion *or* we can follow proven scientific practices for healing.” “Um, why can’t we do *both*, doc? Can’t you do the medical thing *with* compassion?”

But as we sat there, I was shocked as the no vote carried the day by a slim margin. I could not believe I was part of a religious organization that would officially refuse to align themselves with the ideal of compassion. It was so disappointing. I didn't sleep well that night. And neither did our General Superintendent. He said the Holy Spirit kept him awake all night. And the next morning he came to chair the business meeting and he began to talk honestly from his heart.

In reality, he broke some protocols, but I believe Paul would say "If I follow Robert's Rules of Order, but have not love..." So anyway, after his wise and passionate words, someone moved that we reconsider the motion and this time it passed overwhelmingly. Today the Assemblies of God has four stated purposes and one of them is compassion.

At his retirement a few years ago, I told this leader that I felt like that was his greatest moment. And I could tell it moved him. By the way, his name is Dr. George Wood and we need to pray for him, I just learned that he was diagnosed with cancer this last week. He is someone who has meant a lot to me and I love him. But what happened at that council was what I think is happening in that Minneapolis church and probably what is happening in churches around the country. The spirit of fear creates a false dichotomy between empathy and truth.

False dichotomy. Has to be, because it doesn't take into account the nature of Jesus. See I'm a theologian, not a psychologist. And for me, the matter of ultimate concern is always Jesus Christ and him crucified. He is the lens through which I view *everything*. You may remember that we did a series a year ago about how you have to read the Old Testament through a Jesus lens or you're going to wind up with some toxic theology. But I apply the Jesus lens to everything in my life. I read the news through a Jesus lens. I consider my relationships through a Jesus lens. I make political decisions through a Jesus lens – which is why I'm not a member of any one political party these days, because neither one has corner on "what would Jesus do?"

So when I was getting confused by all these subjective definitions of empathy and sympathy and compassion, I decided to do some Bible word studies. Even more than Brené Brown, even more than my denomination, I want to know what *Jesus* thinks of the emotional life. Of course the problem is Jesus life is not recorded in English – it was written in Greek, so we have some translation choices to make. So there are a couple of Greek words that are used for the emotional interactions we're exploring.

Look at **Matthew 9:36**, “*When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had **compassion** on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” Now, in the Greek, what Jesus had was *splanchnizomai*. It comes from the word for the lower intestines – *splachna*. For the Hebrew people, the seat of the emotions was not the heart, but the guts. Their Valentines Day cards were shaped *very* differently!

So what this is saying is that when Jesus looked at these crowds of suffering human beings, he was so moved that it made his stomach churn. He felt it in the center of his being. He wasn’t just disconnectedly thinking, “Well bless your heart.” No, he entered into their suffering and his love for them made him suffer – *splanchnizomai*.

But there’s another Greek word for the emotional life that is applied to Jesus and I think it hits even closer to what we mean by a *toV* church nurtures empathy. In fact, if you look close, **Hebrews 4:15-16**, contains the key words of the first *two* values of *The Circle of Tov*. Talking about Jesus, “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to **empathize** with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of **grace** with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and **find grace** to help us in our time of need.*”

Wow, this particular translation just comes right out and translates it as “empathy”. That’s makes the “sins of empathy” argument difficult, doesn’t it? But let’s be honest with the text, again it’s not originally written in English. And most translations use a different word choice. In fact, what’s on the screen is the “new” NIV, when I study I use the “old” NIV – just because it’s what I’ve been I used to since elementary school – and the old one translates that same word as “sympathy”.

Now, I’m going to tell you what the Greek word is. And when I do, you’re going to think you know Greek. This is one of those words that sounds so close to the English that we immediately go, “Hey, I know what *that* means!” It’s called a cognate. My daughter is taking French at UT and she has bits of painter’s tape all over our house with terms on it. And so every time I go to stuff my face I read Réfrigégrator and I go, “I can speak France!” So you’re all going to speak Greek.

The word that we read there for “empathy” is, in Greek, *sumpatheo* – which sounds like...? “Sympathy”. But *sumpatheo* is a conjunction of two Greek words, *sun* meaning “with” and *pascho*, meaning “to suffer.” Have you ever heard of Jesus at Easter referred to as the “paschal lamb”? It comes from this word. *Pascho* is where our word for “passion” comes from. Thus the “Passion of the Christ”. So the word here in Hebrews translated “empathize” literally means “to suffer with, to be affected similarly”.

This is who Jesus is. This is what the theology of the incarnation is all about. When he came from heaven and put on a suit of flesh – entered that manger as a helpless baby – Jesus was jumping into the hole with us. So I want to spend the rest of our time this morning focusing in on this passage from Hebrews. Because if the leader is the key influence in whether a culture is toxic or *tov*, and Jesus is the leader above all leaders, then if he is empathetic, empathy must not be toxic in and of itself. Just the opposite actually.

If we celebrate the suffering of Jesus at Easter, we celebrate his incarnation at...Christmas. What's Christmas? That God became human. A famous prophecy that is often read – or sung - at that time of year is **Isaiah 9:6**, “*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...And he will be called **Wonderful Counselor**...*” So one of the things we see here is because Jesus became human he's the perfect counselor.

Because Jesus is human, because he's like us, because he has been made like us, because he has had the same experiences we've had, he's the perfect problem-solver. He's the perfect counselor. He's the perfect priest. I'd just like to, first of all, think with you about what it means to be a priest, what a priest is, and what makes a good priest – a *tov* priest - and just to show you why Jesus Christ is the ultimate priest.

Let me just, first of all, remind you a little bit about what a priest is. In the Old Testament, a prophet and a priest were two different things. It's a little hard for us to get into how singular the focus of the priesthood is, because most of us who have ever been in churches that had priests - in our church I'm not called a priest, but in many churches the clergy are called priests. Priests today both speak to people - they preach, they teach - but they also sympathize and serve.

Not so in the Old Testament, a prophet was the one who spoke to the people on God's behalf. But a priest was not someone who spoke *to* people, but rather someone who spoke *for* them. In the tabernacle or temple, the priest always had his back to the people, not because the people weren't important to him. Oh no. But because his job was not to preach and exhort and lecture. His job was not to speak *to* the people; his job was to speak *for* the people. And who was he speaking to? To God! His job was to get into the people's shoes, feel their pain, bear their burdens, and besiege heaven for them, pray for them, offer sacrifices for them. That's what a priest was.

I would like to propose to you there are two things a good priest had to have in order to be effective. The priest had to be like us and yet unlike us. For example, to me the quintessential example of a person who went in the Old Testament looking for priestly ministry and didn't get it was Hannah. Do you know her story? Hannah was eventually the mother of Samuel – who would anoint the first kings of Israel - but at first Hannah went to the tabernacle because she felt absolutely upset and in despair because she could not have a child.

And so she goes in to pray and it says the priest, Eli, notices her, look what it says, **1 Samuel 1:13-14**, *“Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, ‘How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine.’”* Well that's some great bedside manner! Next time you come in to see me about some matter that's troubling you, why don't I pull this one out – “What are you, drunk?”

Hannah goes in looking for priestly help and all she gets is, “Yeah, yeah, go in peace, may God grant your request...yawn.” I mean she pours her heart out, but there's no empathy. He's not moved. There's no priestly connection. We can imagine her thinking, “This man has never known unfulfilled longing. This man has never known loneliness.”

“This man has never known deep disappointment. This man has never known what it's like to feel abandoned by God. This man is not like me. He's having a great life. Fine, he's clearly a holy man, but he can't be my priest.” There's no deep connection. He's not like her. So she gets nothing from it.

What if instead the priest looks at her and begins to weep with her, and by his words and by his spirit Hannah senses he does know unfulfilled longing, he has known disappointment, he has known what it's like to be abandoned by God? He says, “I'm going to pray for you,” and he prays for her right there. He says, “I'm going to offer sacrifices for you. I'm going to stand with you in this thing,” and her heart is lifted up. Why? Because there's nothing like great priestly ministry.

Now do you see? This isn't so esoteric and remote, this priesthood thing. What is he? He's a Wonderful Counselor. He stands with her. She suddenly feels like she has a backbone. She has someone alongside of her. She has an advocate. She's lifted up because her priest is like her. That's the first thing any priest has to have in order to be effective.

But a good priest not only has to be like you, but *unlike* you. Here's what I mean by that. Imagine Hannah going to the tabernacle and pouring out her trouble. She looks up, and what if the priest instead said, "This is terrible. You're right. Life is terrible. I don't know how we can bear it," and he breaks down and hugs her. What is she going to do? She's going to say, "Maybe we'd both better go find a priest someplace. This isn't helping me."

She pours her life out, and he breaks down. You don't want a counselor who's *just* like you. You also want a counselor who is unlike you in this. You want someone not only who has been through the dark valley you're in, but you'd like to have somebody who can say, "There's a way out." You remember Brené Brown said, you go down in the hole, but you better have a way back out. You don't want someone who says, "I don't know that there's any way out either."

One of the reasons the Twelve-Step movement has been so effective is when you walk in there you see other people who have been through the same valley and have survived. Just simply by standing there and looking at you and saying, "I've been through what you've going through, but I got through it," what is that? Why does that transform so many lives just to have somebody say that? That's priestly ministry.

You don't just want someone who's *just* like you. You also want someone who's stronger than you, who has more hope than you, who can see the way through. In other words, you do not just simply want a person who is like you, but you also have to have someone who is unlike you. And this is why Jesus is the perfect Priest.

Let's look again at **v.15** "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, **just as we are**—yet he did not sin.*" "Just as we are ... yet." Do you see it? He's as we are, yet he's not *exactly* as we are. Jesus is the perfect Priest. Let me show you.

First of all, he is like us. He's as we are. How's that so? It says he was "tempted in every way". One of the problems with that verse is the word "tempted". We have translation issues again, because in English the word "tempted" really means situations in which you're being encouraged to sin. The trouble is the Greek word that's used here is much more general than that. What it's really saying is he endured everything we endure. That means Jesus has experienced everything we've experienced.

Now somebody says, “Hold on.” I’ve heard people say over the years. “Wait a minute. He has experienced *everything* we’ve experienced? He never went through a divorce like I have,” somebody says. “He has never had a miscarriage like I’ve had,” somebody says. “He doesn’t know what it’s like to be paralyzed from the neck down, in a wheelchair,” somebody says. “He has never been through *these* things.”

But don’t you see? Experiences have their external dynamics, and then they have their core. On the one hand, if you really want to press your logic here, you could say *nobody* has ever experienced anything anybody has ever experienced. We’re all different. Every one of our experiences is as unique as a snowflake. But there’s a core. What are the cores of these experiences? They’re the same things we mentioned when we were talking about Hannah.

What did she feel? Unfulfilled longing, deep disappointment, alienation, loneliness, and a sense of being abandoned by God. When the Bible says Jesus has experienced everything we’ve experienced...*Nobody* has ever had the unfulfilled longings Jesus had. Nobody has ever had the alienation Jesus had. No one has ever experienced the disappointment Jesus had, and nobody has ever been abandoned by God the way Jesus was.

I’m reading a beautiful book right now about the heart of Jesus and there’s a part where the author actually talks about this passage, and he says, “Jesus is not Zeus. He was a sinless man, not a sinless superman. He woke up with bed head. He had pimples at 13. He knows what it is to be thirsty, hungry, despised, rejected, scorned, ashamed, embarrassed, abandoned, misunderstood, falsely accused, suffocated, tortured, and killed. He knows what it is to be lonely. His friends abandoned him when he needed them most; had he lived today, every last Twitter follower and Facebook friend would’ve un-friended him when he turned 33 – he who will never unfriend us.” (Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 47)

That means whatever you’ve experienced externally...the divorce, the miscarriage, the paralysis, the death of a child...all of the things that you say, “Jesus never experienced those,” but the core ...the abandonment, the alienation, the deep disappointment, the despair...oh my. Jesus has experienced so much more than you and I have, than the worst sufferers in this room, than the worst sufferers in history. He has experienced so much more.

Our suffering is so much smaller than his was, as a grain of sand is smaller than a mountain range. In every way he’s like us. He’s utterly and completely like us. But notice it says, “Tempted in every way, *yet without sin.*” Jesus Christ experienced everything we’ve experienced, he faced everything many times over, but he only and completely responded with integrity, with love, with power, so he’s unlike us.

Again, here's the other objection. People often will say, "Wait a minute. You say he has experienced *all* we've experienced, but he hasn't sinned, so he doesn't know. How can he really sympathize with us if he never sinned?" But that's the danger that everyone is talking about with how we view empathy. If you *completely* lose yourself in the other, you can't help them anymore. Jesus never lost sight of who he really was. He was always fully human and he was always fully divine - that's the mystery.

The writer is saying he can sympathize because he's like us and yet without sin. In other words, it's his *sinlessness* that is as important for his perfect sympathy as is his *common experience* with us. Let me put it this way. I'm something of a priest, right? I'm in the helping profession. Some of you are as well. Part of your occupation involves listening to people's problems.

Can I be honest with you? When I have trouble empathizing with people, the main reason why I do is *not* because I don't know what they're going through; it's because of my sin. It's my selfishness, my irritability, my impatience, my pride, that makes it so hard to enter into other people's lives, to enter into their heart and their hurt. The core of sin is self-centeredness.

I'll tell you what sin makes you feel like. Sin makes you feel like, "Nobody understands me. I am so deep. I am so complicated. No one has ever faced the things I'm having to face. My problems are so unique." That's sin. It's made of self-pity. It's made of self-absorption. It's made of self-centeredness. That's the nature of sin: self-justifying, making excuses, feeling so sorry for yourself.

And that makes it impossible for you to fully enter into anyone else's experience. The more sinful you are - the more sin has ahold of you - the less empathetic you are. Oh, you may have gone through what they're going through, but you don't *feel* like climbing down into the pit with them. You don't feel any empathy for them. You're too wrapped up in your own problems. Remember what the shadow form of empathy is - what's the toxic to the *toiv*? Narcissism. We talked about that a couple of weeks back.

Therefore, it's not just a lack of common experience that can keep you from being an empathetic counselor. It's not just that you have never experienced their problems. That might keep you from being a good counselor. But if you've been *defeated* by their problems, that makes you a lousy counselor too, if you're still in the middle of your problems.

Don't you see why Jesus, therefore, is the ultimate counselor? Jesus was totally burned. Jesus went to the *depths* of the pit. Yet Jesus is totally pure, totally loving, totally godly. Moral purity. So he has none of the sin that eats up the empathy, and yet he has had all of the experiences that create the empathy. He is the perfect counselor. He's not like any of us.

Some people can't be there for you because they just have no clue what you're going through. Other people know *exactly* what you're going through, but they're so wounded themselves they will just drag you down deeper, faster. But Jesus Christ has been through to the pit, yet without sin. He remembers what it's like to be dust. He remembers what it's like to feel pain. He knows what it's like to go through what you've been through. Yet, because he came through without sin, he is utterly in you.

He's not wrapped up in himself. His heart goes completely out to you. He's completely wrapped up in you. He knows how many tears have gone down your cheeks. He knows the number of hairs on your head. He keeps all of your tears in his bottle. The Bible says Jesus loves you more than you love yourself. He is the Wonderful Counselor.

Don't you see it? There's a place where Jesus heals a deaf mute, it's in **Mark 7:34** and it says, "*He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, 'Ephphatha!'*" (which means "Be opened!")." Oh, the sigh of Jesus. He's drained. Those of us who give counsel know it's possible to listen to somebody pour out their problems and say to yourself, "I can't afford this. I can't be drawn into his hurt. I can't let my heart connect with his heart. I can't let that deep, priestly connection happen. It'll be too draining." So you detach, and you say, "Nope," and then you dispense advice.

Or you can let the person touch you. You can let your heart be pulled into their heart and your feelings pulled into their feelings. And when that happens, when you empathize with them – enter their suffering - they feel lifted up, but you are drained. When the woman with the hemorrhage touched Jesus, he says, "Power went out from me." Do you know why? That's the way he helps people. He's drained. Most of us have a great deal of trouble with that.

Jesus Christ in front of the tomb of his dear friend. Lazarus is dead, and Jesus is weeping. Why is he weeping? In five minutes he's going to bring him back from the dead. So why is he weeping? Because his heart doesn't belong to him anymore. His heart is Mary's heart. His heart is Martha's heart. His heart is Lazarus' heart. That's the reason why he's the perfect and wonderful counselor.

Now, here's the kicker. Because Jesus has done this for us...we can now do this for others. He says in **John 14:12**, "*Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and **they will do even greater things than these...***" We believe around here in something called "the priesthood of *all* believers." Your pastors can't be the only ones to do this. Do you love God? Then God says you have to love your neighbor. And part of loving them means getting in the hole with them. Being *with them* in their suffering and their pain.

Look, I get why people are afraid to do this. I understand why it's safer to rationalize the "sins of empathy" and keep your distance. It's scary. It's risky. It's dangerous. You might get hurt – after all, you're dealing with hurt people and what's the saying? "Hurt people, hurt people." Even worse, you may do it wrong. We may say the wrong thing. We're not perfect. Brené Brown lists a number of common "empathy misses". She says, "Empathy is a hard skill to learn because mastery requires practice, and practice means you'll screw it up big-time more than once. But that's how practice works." (157)

I guess what I'm saying is empathy takes vulnerability. But so does all of Christianity. Thursday night I was honored to get to speak at the Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship at the University of Texas. It was great to be back on campus. That was my group when I was in college. And I was speaking in the same building where we used to meet when I was a student. It's surreal every time I do it.

But I have this vivid memory of my Chi Alpha leaders – Barry and Alicia Chole – they would say this all the time, "This is the position of Christian leadership..." And they would stand with their arms outstretched like Jesus on the cross. And that's a vulnerable position. You'd never do that in boxing, you're too exposed. The defense position in boxing protects your body and your face. But it's really hard to hug someone in a defensive position.

I've never forgotten that lesson. The position of Christian ministry is always outstretched arms. Always vulnerability. Because that's how our High Priest did it for us. The more you go to Jesus as the High Priest, the more you'll be a priest to others. Are we a priestly community? Are you safe? Are you willing to get into the pit with other people? Are you working on your mess – taking it to Jesus to be healed – so that one day you'll be in a position to help those afflicted with what used to afflict you?

That's what a goodness culture looks like. *Tov* churches nurture empathy. They don't circle the wagons, they open their arms. Because that's what Jesus did for us. Therefore, *Let us then approach God's throne of **grace** with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and **find grace** to help us in our time of need.*" And then we can help others in there's.

Let's pray...