

Sermon – January 23, 2021
Pastor Dan Hollis
Luke 4:1-2, 14-21

If you've ever wondered, "What's *Jesus* about?" I'm sorry to say there isn't an easy answer to that. If you aren't a Christian, you might ask, "What's the purpose of Jesus?" If you're a religious academic, you might ask something like, "What's the function of Christ?" If you're in a whimsical mood, you might just ask, "What's a Messiah to do?"

Matthew 1:21, which we read at Christmastime, says, "[Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Which is a good answer... but it's not the *whole* answer. Because Jesus came for a *lot* of reasons... the Son of God had *more* than *one* purpose—that's why Matthew's more than one verse, and why we needed more than one book in the New Testament.

Today I want to focus on *one* of the things Jesus was "about." One of the purposes of the Messiah, one of the main reasons the Son of God was born... was to teach us about empathy.

Jesus came to teach us that we should we feel the pain and struggle of others as if it were our own, and *empathy* should spur us to *action* here and now.

"Empathy" is defined as the ability to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within *their* frame of reference—to put yourself in another person's shoes. It's something every human has the capacity to do to some degree; it's part of the way our mind works, and it's something we cultivate in childhood as our brains develop. There's a spectrum of course—people grow up to be more or less empathic than others as a result of both nature *and* nurture—but empathy is an intrinsically human quality.

Psychologist Martin Hoffman describes five stages in the development of what he calls "empathic distress" in children. First, we cry because we're distressed; second, we see *others* in distress, but we're too young to distinguish between "ourselves" and "someone else," so when our *mom* stubs her toe *we* start crying as though *we're* the ones in pain.

Then, when we're old enough that we *still* think we're the center of the universe—but recognize that there *are* other *people* in that universe—when someone *else* appears to be in distress we try to comfort them the way *we* would want to be comforted (do unto others as you would have them do unto you, right?).

But that's not the whole story. Because what *you* need when you're in pain is probably different than what somebody else might need. Some people find a hug comforting, some people find that kind of intimacy *un*-comfortable. Some people need someone to *talk* to when they're in pain, others need space and solitude. Some need to

immediately *work* through the problem that's giving them anxiety, and others need distance and time to settle their spirits. There's no one-size-fits-all for distress, and *true* empathy requires putting *yourself* in the shoes of *another* to both feel what *they* feel and determine what *they* may need.

So we have a lot of hurdles in our way. No matter how natural, how biological, how *human* empathy is... our *first* hurdle is the time and opportunity to *develop* it—we need a safe and loving environment with the nourishment required for our infant brains to grow the way they're supposed to. Our second hurdle is the chasm between understanding the feelings "*I*" feel and the feelings *others* feel. And our *third* hurdle is what stands between *knowing* and *doing something about it*.

And so I return to my focus for today. **Jesus came to teach us that we should we feel the pain and struggle of others as if it were our own, and empathy should spur us to *action* here and now.** I drew that focus, that one purpose among many that the Son of God was born to fulfill, from Luke 4, the Scripture we read earlier.

In it, Jesus went to the synagogue in the town he grew up in, and the worship leaders offered him the opportunity to read aloud from the Book of Isaiah. He was given his pick of that big, holy scroll's contents, and he zeroed in on one passage in particular: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Finally, he said simply, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That is to say, "*That's* who I am. That Scripture I just read? *That's* what I'm about."

There are two things you need to know to understand how I got from that moment in the synagogue to my thesis about empathy.

The first is the "year of the Lord's favor." It was a year described in Hebrew Scriptures as a year of "jubilee," when exploitation of the earth would cease, when slaves and servants would be released, debts would be forgiven, land and property returned to its original owners, and all people would share in the world's bounty. It was about restoration and atonement and holiness—about living closer to God, establishing justice, and ensuring domestic tranquility. (Hey, that's two weeks in a row your pastors have alluded to the Preamble of the Constitution.)

It was a radical and impractical vision; a year of jubilee would have totally upended society and thrown civilization itself upside-down... which is probably why the year of jubilee was never celebrated *literally*. Instead of an instruction for the present, it was... projected to a promise for the future.

And then this Jesus guy shows up and says *he's* here to *proclaim* the year of the Lord's favor... to call for the radical restoration of the world here and now, not just in some mythical future or in Heaven to come.

The *second* thing you need to know, is where Jesus *was* right before he started reading scrolls in synagogues.

A few weeks ago, we remembered the baptism of Jesus at the start of his adult ministry. The Gospel of Luke lays it out chronologically: first, Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan, then from the *Jordan* Jesus followed the Spirit into the wilderness, "where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished."

You may have heard the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. It was like a test or a crucible for the newly baptized Jesus that prepared him for the rest of his ministry. For forty days he was starved, powerless, and helpless. As the Son of God, he didn't *need* to be—he could snap his fingers and all his needs would be met—but he resisted the temptation and struggled as any *human* would with mortality, scarcity, and an adversary making empty promises of table scraps in exchange for devotion.

And then what happened *next*, when the forty days were over? The *memory* of starvation and powerlessness still clinging to him, but *filled* with the power of the Spirit, Jesus traveled through Galilee, going from synagogue to synagogue to *teach*. Which is how we find him in Nazareth, reading from the scroll of Isaiah.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Why do you think *that* was the part of the scroll he turned to? *I* think it had a lot to do with where he had just been... or rather, what he had just been *through*.

Dr. Hoffman identifies two "higher-order" parts of empathy—triggers that require *work* from our minds and go *beyond* a child's instinct. The first is called "mediated association," making a *connection* between someone's struggle or situation... with a

painful experience from our *own* past; the *second* is “perspective-taking,” where we consciously imagine how *we* would feel in *their* situation.

When Jesus was reading aloud about uplifting the poor, bringing wholeness to the disadvantaged, and freeing the oppressed, what do you think he was remembering?

A critical part of Christian theology is that the Son of God was *both* fully God *and* fully human. What I like to call “the Jesus Incident” was the act of the *divine* taking *humanity* upon itself. So when Jesus was preaching those words from the synagogue, and when he went *on* to preach words *like* them from mountaintop to ramshackle home to city street to even the cross that killed him, how could he not be reminded of his time—his quintessentially *human* time—starving and powerless in the wilderness?

Every person he met who had no food would have reminded him of his forty days of starvation. Every person he met under the boot of the powerful would have reminded him of the boot of the devil on his neck. And every person he met without sight, or hearing, or mobility would have reminded him that *he* was no longer as powerless as he was in that wilderness. “Mediated association.” “Perspective-taking.” *Empathy*.

Jesus came to teach us that we should we feel the pain and struggle of others as if it were our own, and *empathy* should spur us to *action* here and now. Jesus Christ came to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor *now*, because people are suffering *now*, and because the *human* and the *divine* Son of God feels their pain as if it were his own. His ministry reflected that. His teachings reflected that and his actions reflected that. Every time Christ fed another, it was to compel *us* to ensure *others* had the food they needed. Every time Christ healed another, it was to compel *us* to ensure *others* had the healthcare they needed. Every time Christ released or empowered or forgave another, it was to compel *us* to *act... on and out of* empathy.

Jesus came to teach our hearts to cry out for the oppressed and the hungry and the disadvantaged and the cheated and the rejected... to inspire us to new heights of empathy and to *compel* us to *action*.

Jesus came to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Who are we to ignore that call?
Thanks be to God. Amen.