

ACTS OF KINDNESS: RADICAL EMPATHY

Scripture used: [Luke 10:25-37 \(NLT\)](#)

OVERVIEW

Our Scripture today is an iconic text. In it, a learned Jewish man puts Jesus to the test, and asks: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a profoundly disruptive story for those times, and for ours. Jesus tells a tale of radical empathy, of putting a wounded man on one’s donkey, of taking the wounded man to safety, of expending great effort to help another person and to ensure their welfare. At the heart of this extraordinary story is empathy. Empathy is the ability to feel what another human being is feeling, and see the situation as they see it.

KEY POINTS

1. Empathy starts with a cognitive step: we have awareness of another person’s challenges. Then we “get it” emotionally: we feel it deep within ourselves. Brenne Brown uses the analogy of a ladder. We go down willingly to the hurting person’s level and connect in their pain. We refrain from using words that aim to soothe, to rationalize, to contextualize, such as “at least...” These words are not helpful to people who are “in the hole”, in the dark.
2. The next step is compassion, when we are spontaneously moved to help, and feel a compulsion to do something. The Samaritan goes from sentiment to action with speed and efficacy. This is what Terri E. Givens describes in her book “Radical Empathy.” Jesus calls us to behave this way in the midst of our deeply broken world. The road traveled by the protagonists in the story is notoriously dangerous. The Samaritan is remarkably sacrificial - he commits his own transportation and resources.
3. The story portrays different archetypes and categories of people and behaviors. The implicit question is: which one of these categories best defines us and our life at this moment?
 - Am I one of the attackers? Am I in attack mode most of the time? The Samaritan is from a despised group - do I demonize “others”?
 - Have I recently been victimized? Do I need to find a safe space to heal?
 - Am I a bystander, called by God to intervene, but afraid of the cost of involvement?
 - Or, am I the Samaritan, willing to allow God’s love to be expressed through me... even for an enemy?
4. The narrative is deeply thought-provoking, as it questions status, roles, and identity. Questioning the usual narratives is the trigger to activate radical empathy. In August 2017, there were episodes of horrific violence in Charlottesville, VA, culminating in a neo-Nazi march reminiscent of the darkest times in Nazi Germany. The neo-nazis were shouting “You will not replace us” - they were acting out their hatred, and also from a sense of injury and harm. It will be impossible for us to partner with God in changing people’s hearts if we are unable to understand their pain, even the pain of our enemies.
5. [Matthew 5:43](#) reminds us to love our enemies, to pray for those who despise us. We must empathize with others’ stories and weaknesses. This takes training: listening with an open mind, asking questions, articulating what people went through, and sharing our perspective without devaluing or dismissing their story. It is perspective-shifting, just like the parable of the Good Samaritan! It clarifies areas of agreement, and creates space to continue dialogue. It lets Jesus take charge with His supernatural power. It does not fix everything, but it facilitates new beginnings. It may not light up the whole world, but it will surely light up our sphere of influence.

DISCUSSION

- 1) **HEAR** - Can you remember a moment when you stepped into the shoes/perspective of someone very different from you, and gained a new understanding or appreciation?
- 2) **UNDERSTAND** - Re-read [Luke 10:25-37 \(NLT\)](#) from the perspective of the presence or absence of empathy. How does empathy ebb and flow in our lives on a daily basis? Are there ways we feel like we have to protect ourselves from having too much empathy? How do we balance empathy with appropriate boundaries and spiritual health?
- 3) **DO** - Pray for yourself and others, for empathy, healing, and unity. Join us next Sunday as we lean into ways that God is calling us to be a light individually and as a community! Sign up to serve with others from NBCC on Saturday, Nov 12 with our Be Rich to Others campaign at www.nbccbayarea.com/BeRich