

---

## *Empathic Lent*

**A sermon by the Rev. Theophus “Thee” Smith**  
**Lent 5A**

Invocation: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight; O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen (Paraphrase: Ps.19.14)

Over the past several years I’ve been exploring the theme of empathy, and the related word ‘empathic,’ and even the identity of being an empath. Now I don’t mean sympathy, but I want to say right away that sympathy can be a good thing between people. Both sympathy and empathy may be good or desirable at times; but today I want to distinguish the two. Sympathy, for example, may be what we see in today’s gospel when Jesus stands alongside Mary, the sister of the dead Lazarus, and famously begins to weep. We call it sympathy when we say that he was feeling the grief of the sisters, Mary and Martha, or ‘feeling sorry’ for them, as we sometimes say; sorry for their loss of their dead brother.

Now many of us know that this verse [“Jesus began to weep” (John 11.35) is not only the shortest verse in the Bible but also] is the only verse in scripture that describes Jesus weeping. You may even know that this is the only time in the New Testament when that particular word for his weeping is used (*dakruo* in vs. 35). That’s right: an entirely different word is used to describe the weeping of Mary and the other mourners (*klaio* in vs. 33)—some of whom would have been professional or ritual mourners. But very few of us, I suspect, know that there’s an equally interesting issue about Jesus’ emotions elsewhere in today’s gospel. In fact it’s a related issue in biblical scholarship concerning the words used to describe Jesus’ other feelings that day.

As he’s making his way to the tomb of his friend in addition to weeping Jesus is also described as feeling “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (vss. 33, 38). But the two words that are translated, “greatly disturbed” and “deeply moved” are not emotions of sympathy and compassion. Rather, according to my former colleague at our seminary at Emory, Prof. Gail O’Day, the Greek words mean anger and indignation. Here I quote Gail O’Day directly:

The evidence . . . seems incontestable that Jesus is described as angry in v. 33. But why do the tears of Mary and the ‘Jews’ arouse Jesus’ anger and indignation? (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, IX: 690)

Well to that question Prof. O’Day summarizes the answers from other commentators, and then she offers her own answer. But as a member of our Cathedral Greek class—that’s right, watch out now: I’m about to slip in a little advertisement for our biblical Greek class here at St. Philip’s—as a member of our Cathedral Greek class I offer my own informed answer to the question of Jesus’ indignation. Of course translators and commentators can reasonably differ on such matters. But I’m always reminded in these kinds of debates of that witty comment when our Jewish brothers and sisters debate on any and every possible subject matter. Maybe you’ve heard this one before: ‘Two Jews, three opinions.’

Well, here’s my opinion. I think that Jesus is angry and indignant over the weeping of his fellow Jews, for the same reason that a different word is used for his weeping from that of everyone else. It’s because he’s *not* in fact sympathizing but instead he’s empathizing. And indeed he’s empathizing at an entirely different level from everyone else. By contrast with *his* empathy *their* grief and sympathy entirely misses what is at stake in the death of Lazarus, and even gets in the way of it. I would say that Jesus has a holy empathy with God and with Lazarus as God’s special beloved on that day in Bethany, and that the professional mourners and ritual weeping offends against his focus on that higher purpose. That’s why he’s

righteously angry and indignant, and deeply agitated in spirit.

Now it's certainly an ironic empathy—even counter-intuitive. It seems non-empathic, certainly non-sympathetic, because Jesus waits, as the gospel says, 'two days longer in the place where he was, after hearing that his friend was ill, although he loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.' (John 11.5-6) And why does he wait two days, when he would be expected to sympathize with the suffering of his friends in Bethany? The gospel reports that Jesus gave two answers to that familiar question.

Even before he leaves for Bethany Jesus tries to disclose to his disciples what's going on at a deeper level. But once again they 'just don't get it.' It starts when he gets that one-sentence message from the two sisters, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." That's when he makes his first effort to enlighten the disciples. "This illness does not lead to death," he declares, "rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." (John 11.3-4) But then, after waiting two days he acknowledges that Lazarus has indeed died. That's when he makes his second disclosure, "For your sake," he says, "I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." (John 11.11, 15)

Here are two answers, then, to the question of why Jesus waited two days: to glorify God, and to generate or foster belief. How are the two related? What's the connection between glorifying God and belief in God's works? I think it has to do with acquiring holy empathy for God's purposes, plans, and activities; that is: believing in the glory of God as if it were our own glorification that is at stake—our own fullness of life, our own vitality, and our own flourishing; all those things that mean glory for us: vitality, fullness, and flourishing. Because that's what empathy means: putting ourselves in someone else's place as if what matters to them also matters to us. In the case of holy empathy that someone happens to be God and God's chosen ones in any given situation.

---

One of my favorite modern-day empathys was the celebrated African American mystic, the writer and preacher, Howard Thurman (1900-1981). Thurman described *himself* as an empath when he said that it was like his 'going down in me and coming up in you.'<sup>[1]</sup> That kind of identification can involve not necessarily feeling sympathy but something more like solidarity with someone else.

And that's the solidarity that Holy Church calls us to practice today as we conclude these final days in our Lenten journey. Lent involves our solidarity with Jesus' way of the Cross in which we are putting to death in ourselves those things that hinder us from glorifying God and God's purposes in our lives. Lenten observances are practices of preferring the divine life in us to our own life apart from God. Or again, to invoke Thurman's dynamic image, it's 'going down in ourselves and coming up in Jesus;' or coming up with Jesus' dying and rising in ourselves. St. Paul says it this way in today's reading from Romans:

If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Rom. 8.10)

The apostle is even more graphic, or as dynamic as Thurman, in the verses that follow today's reading from Romans; specifically vs. 13 that exhorts us to 'put to death by the Spirit the deeds of the body in order that we may truly live' (Rom. 8.13). In fact, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians St. Paul describes apostolic Christians like himself as empathys in the following way:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, [Paul says,] so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4.7-10)

Now, does that sound too somber, too solemn, too *Lenten*: "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies?" To the contrary, for that those first apostolic communities in church history this was an ecstatic declaration! Again, following our Romans passage appointed for today, just a bit further at v. 17, the apostle exults to 'suffer with Christ so that we may also be glorified with him.' Indeed, he says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."

And then he goes on to declare what must have been in the mind and heart of Jesus that day when he was the tomb of his beloved friend. Knowing what glory was about to ensue, as he had announced days before to his closest disciples, and

getting past all those ritual mourners who were fixated on tragic sympathy rather than empathic expectation of the miracle, he must have felt something like what Paul describes next:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8.17-19, 21)

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is just such a “revealing:” a precursor of that general resurrection that Jesus himself will inaugurate in his own rising from the dead. That’s what at stake in the raising of Lazarus that day in Bethany, for which Jesus is intent on God’s glory and empathic for his friend Lazarus participating in that glory!

---

And that is the invitation to ‘empathic glory’ that is ‘on offer’ to us today. In these waning days of Lent we have the grace-filled opportunity to enter into this extraordinary empathy with the purposes and power of God in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. So let’s not be conventional sympathizers here; neither sympathizing with our own issues of loss or grief or lack of fulfillment, nor sympathizing in a conventional manner with the losses or tragedies of others. Rather let’s do something more audacious, even glorious. Let go, let atrophy—let wither away some key places in our lives that hinder the breaking-through of God’s life flourishing within us. And then as we approach the Easter goal of our Lenten journey may we be blessed with the true joys—the prize of resurrection to new life, and the joys for which we pray in our opening prayer appointed for today: the Collect for this Fifth Sunday in Lent:

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace, to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys [repeat: true joys] are to be found ... Amen.

[1] “Now if I hear the sound of the genuine in me, and if you hear the sound of the genuine in you, it is possible for *me to go down in me and come up in you*. So that when I look at myself through your eyes having made that pilgrimage, I see in me what you see in me and the wall that separates and divides will disappear and we will become one because the sound of the genuine makes the same music.” Dr. Howard Thurman: *The Sound of the Genuine* (Excerpts from Dr. Howard Thurman’s Baccalaureate Address – Spelman College, May 4, 1980. Edited by Jo Moore Stewart, Editor of the Spelman Messenger). ©2014 Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. All rights reserved. [www.ptev.org/hints.aspx?iid=4](http://www.ptev.org/hints.aspx?iid=4) (accessed by Rev. Theophus H. Smith on 4/5/2014; emphasis mine)