

Sixth Sunday after The Epiphany, Year C
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on February 16, 2025

Jeremiah 17:5-10 / Psalm 1 / 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 / Luke 6:17-26

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

Let me make one final plea...In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children ... who fear for their lives. And the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labor in our poultry farms and meat-packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shift in hospitals – they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes, and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogues, gurdwara, and temples. Have mercy ... on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land. May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, speak the truth in love, and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world.

The Right Rev Mariann Edgar Budde, Bishop of Washington

Does anyone recognize this text? What 2 words are missing? “Mr President.” It’s the end of the sermon at the national prayer service at Washington National Cathedral on January 21, 2025 by The Right Rev Mariann Edgar Budde, Bishop of Washington. It seems all very in-line with today’s Gospel. The Blessings & Woes, as they’re called, are Luke’s version of The Beatitudes found in Matthew’s Gospel. A noticeable difference between the two is:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

But I think we can all see how Bishop Budde's plea is completely in-line with today's Gospel. Jesus declares His blessing upon the marginalized: the poor, the hungry, the distraught and the reviled. Jesus also warns those who are abusive with what they have and exploit others: the rich, the overindulgent, the contemptuous and the arrogant. Can we all see that in her words? Great! I'm done! See you later!

What I actually want to address today is the enormous backlash that Bishop Budde's plea received, which led to public condemnation and even death threats...from "Christians" ...for preaching about mercy.

There was one key tweet that got spread around like wildfire – It currently has 22.4M views. That's on Twitter. Who knows how many times it's been shared on Facebook – where I saw it – and other social media platforms. It was shared by both people who were shocked to read such a blind-and-deaf comment and those who support the poster's view. The tweet by Ben Garrett [@tompawnbadil] has a photo of Bishop Budde in her mitre and holding her crosier with the text:

Do not commit the sin of empathy. This snake is God's enemy and yours too. She hates God and His people. You need to properly hate in response. She is not merely deceived but is a deceiver. Your eye shall not pity.¹

The more times I saw it and read comments that supported this view, the more I wanted to know if this was an *actual* theological principle among conservative "Christians". Turns out it is!

¹ <https://x.com/tompawnbadil/status/1882115502061068777>

Back in 2019, a theologian wrote on a Christian blog site and shared on social media a piece in the form of the *Screwtape Letters* by CS Lewis. It's presumably Satan writing to one of his minions about how *empathy* is so evil that humans will create their own tyranny by it. So, the aim is to foster tyranny among humans, and they will eventually abandon God, which is what Satan wants. It's entitled: *The Enticing Sin of Empathy: How Satan Corrupts Through Compassion* by Joe Rigney².

As a piece of fiction, it's ... mildly interesting. But through what appears to be an overwhelming response – both positive and negative – Joe Rigney was able to take his theology of the Sin of Empathy on the road. He has been doing the conservative Christian press circuit ever since then, and his book on the subject is released later this week. So, I dove in to try and understand why these people vilified Bishop Budde and basically put forth a theology that is completely antithetical to today's Gospel. It hurt my head; it felt evil just reading a couple resources about it and watching an hour-long interview; and it felt very sinister in its presentation. I'll try to do my best to keep it related to the Good News of Jesus Christ. But I'm going to go a few minutes longer than usual.

Some basic definitions first:

- *Sympathy* and *Compassion* are the same word. One is Latin; one is Greek meaning *to suffer with*.
- *Empathy* means *to suffer into*, and it was first coined in 1908: *English-speaking psychologists needed translations of the German scientific terms appearing in the new discipline of experimental psychology. By around 1913, "empathy" became the term of choice for the German Einfühlung, which literally means "in-feeling." Empathy captured the ability to project one's own inner strivings, movements, and feelings into the shapes of objects.*³

² https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-enticing-sin-of-empathy?fbclid=IwY2xjawlXeqhleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHWhecPTFNif527M733RCkrisoZ7_hxGNxC2ywdbMLQAKpIVrs5avHlKVw_aem_p_U4sOvhbYa37ECz_rtGTA

³ <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2018/11/21/the-origin-of-empathy/>

Joe Rigney believes this to be a sin because:

*The truth of God, the right worship of God, is more precious to us, such that we will not compromise or buckle even in the face of natural affection, even under the influence of pity and empathy.*⁴

He uses the example of someone sinking in quicksand. *Sympathy* would be standing on the shore, braced and reaching out to grab the person sinking. The person sinking doesn't want your *sympathy* because *sympathy* comes with an imbalance of power and involves *pity*. He can't bear your pity; it makes him feel worse. He demands your *empathy* and wants you in the quicksand with him. But being in the quicksand together means that you both sink.

To this theologian, *empathy* literally means to *suffer in*, which means in order to help someone, you identify with them completely; you lose your ability to make independent decisions; you lose contact with the truth; and since Jesus is the Truth, empathy causes you to lose contact with Jesus, and that is the worst sin imaginable. He was very adamant that a Christian's Allegiance is to the truth, to Jesus. And to him, empathy compromises that.

He's OK with sympathy because *sympathy* is to *suffer with*, and you don't lose your allegiance to Jesus. You're able to stay in contact with the truth and make proper decisions. Empathy, to him, is:

*putting someone else in your emotional driver seat. You're giving them the keys to your emotional car and saying you can take this wherever you want. But they're the one who is actually hurting. Instead, ... I have to maintain responsibility for me before God, and then I actually might be able to be some help.*⁵

⁴ <https://americanreformer.org/2024/01/empathy-feminism-and-the-church/>

⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=6i9a3Rfd7yI

The interviewer Doug Wilson reinforces Joe Rigney’s viewpoint by responding:

Having to retain your own identity and your own allegiance to Christ while you exhibit compassion to a neighbor that you should exhibit is the second greatest commandment: love your neighbors yourself. But the first commandment is love for your God. So sympathy remembers to love God while loving the neighbor. Empathy abandons God for the sake of the neighbor, turns the neighbor into God.⁶

His whole argument comes down to confirmation bias. He only brought stuff into his argument that supports his theory. He used the words *parasite* and *contagion* to describe *empathy*. Where in society he found empathy being destructive is right at heart of today’s Gospel. He wrapped every element of the culture wars into that one sin!

My basic contention is that running beneath the ideological conflicts surrounding all things “woke” (race, sexuality, abuse, and LGBTQ+) is a common emotional dynamic involving untethered empathy – that is, a concern for the hurting and vulnerable that is unmoored from truth, goodness, and reality ... It is the means by which various aggrieved groups have been able to steer communities into catering to greater and greater folly and injustice⁷.

He talked about the sin of empathy of those activist groups who have a “*reactive herd instinct*” and they “*weaponize victims*” and the evening news shows stuff that makes people angry and they get onto social media and get everyone riled up and they fall in line with tribalism and make demands on government and society. He used the most extreme examples, some of which many of us find irritating even if we’re supportive of the cause in general.

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=6i9a3Rfd7yI

⁷ <https://americanreformer.org/2024/01/empathy-feminism-and-the-church/>

*You're using them in a power play and you're not actually trying to help them.*⁸

So, what he has done is turned everything that he doesn't like into a theological precept that *must* be adhered to, a sin that *must* be avoided at all costs because it's the abandonment of God, breaking the greatest commandment. That's a false Prophet.

- And the more he bangs on about it,
- the more he gets his thoughts out into the media,
- the more he does interviews with interviewers who double down on his ideology and never question him or pose a hypothetical opposition,
- and because he couples it with the White Supremacist Christian Nationalists primary sin – wokeness –

the more the “sin of empathy” becomes *real*. It's not real. It's the 4 Woes: rich, overindulgent, contemptuous and arrogant. It's White Supremacist Christian Nationalists normalizing a dangerous, nefarious, un-Christian, un-Christ-like ideology in order to justify their bigotry.

This is all grounded in misogyny and complementarianism. The concept of complementarianism is, in his words:

*the reality that men and women are gloriously different and complementary and that these differences are relevant in all areas of life.*⁹

And he states that:

*the empathetic sex is ill-suited to the ministerial office, and thus women's ordination is indeed a watershed issue*¹⁰.

⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=6i9a3Rfd7yI

⁹ <https://americanreformer.org/2024/01/empathy-feminism-and-the-church/>

¹⁰ <https://americanreformer.org/2024/01/empathy-feminism-and-the-church/>

And he quotes Paul:

what Paul calls “the weak women” who are captured by false teachers due to their emotional instability, immaturity, and sin (2 Timothy 3:6-7).

It should be noted that Paul was referring to particular or *some* women, not *all* women.

So when a woman bishop asks the President, who is worshiped and adored by those who believe that empathy is a sin, to have mercy, you have outrage. It gave Joe Rigney yet another opportunity to be the false prophet Jesus warns of in today’s Gospel. He wrote in a conservative newspaper:

Budde’s attempt to “speak truth to power” is a reminder that feminism is a cancer that enables the politics of empathetic manipulation and victimhood that has plagued us in the era of wokeness.¹¹

He twisted facts in his false prophecy. Then, you get this tweet that’s been passed around millions and millions of times:

Do not commit the sin of empathy. This snake is God’s enemy and yours too. She hates God and His people. You need to properly hate in response. She is not merely deceived but is a deceiver.

She handed them their big moment to unveil their false prophecy to the entire nation. A final word from this guy points directly to why there was so much outrage toward Bishop Budde and her call to be merciful:

¹¹ <https://wng.org/opinions/the-bishops-untethered-empathy-1737718078>

*The key need will be leaders who have the moral strength and stamina to resist the inevitable emotional sabotage and manipulation while offering true care and compassion.*¹²

That attitude is the underpinning of the war cry and manipulates the bigotry of White Christian Nationalists into appearing to be compassionate concern for those they hate. False prophecy.

Except for the reference to The Greatest Commandments, they never once talked about Jesus and Jesus' message of love. Not once. I read two long articles and watched an hour-long interview. And not *once* was anything that Jesus tells us or modeled for us or commanded us was brought up by these "Christians".

So, if I turned over the pulpit to any of these theologians, what would they say about today's readings? I don't know. But *I know* Jesus is showing quite a bit of empathy to the poor, the hungry, the distraught and the reviled. He doesn't lose Himself in them; He takes them to Himself, as He takes all the suffering to Himself. And He points us to them so that we, too, might have empathy and that we, too, are to seek out the marginalized with empathy and help them lest we be like the rich, the overindulgent, the contemptuous and the arrogant.

So, what is *empathy*? What does it mean to *suffer in*? The definition of empathy from the American Psychological Association:

*Empathy: understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Empathy does not, of itself, entail motivation to be of assistance, although it may turn into sympathy or personal distress, which may result in action. In psychotherapy, therapist empathy for the client can be a path to comprehension of the client's cognitions, affects, motivations, or behaviors.*¹³

¹² <https://americanreformer.org/2024/01/empathy-feminism-and-the-church/>

¹³ <https://dictionary.apa.org/empathy>

I trust their definition. In that interview, Rigney and Wilson quoted the Second Commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself. Well, that's precisely *understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own*. That's precisely what Jesus is modeling in today's Blessings and warning against *not doing* in today's Woes.

What's even more important in the Empathy War that we Christians are now in is that Bishop Budde never asked the President to have empathy; she asked to have *mercy*. And while Jesus both models for us and demands that we *understand a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own*, the prophet-of-old, Micah says that Lord requires us:

to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.