

“Endurance & Empathy: Let Love Flow”

Matthew 4:1-11; Exodus 17:1-7; Mark 12:41-44 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts and let your compassion flow through our very beings, into our lives and our world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You have heard me say that today is the First Sunday in Lent, the season having begun this past week on Ash Wednesday. And yet, something about that announcement feels off. It was Lent the last time we gathered for worship in our sanctuary, and though we've been through Easter and Pentecost and lots of supposedly “Ordinary Time” and Advent and Christmastide and Epiphany, there is a sense in which Lent never really ended. Inasmuch as Lent is a season of intentional self-denial, when we give up things for the sake of love, the past 11 months when we have faithfully chosen to wear masks and limit our outings and keep our distance and avoid gatherings, for the sake of the health of our whole community, have basically been the extended dance mix version of Lent. And the rhythms of Lent don't make for great dancing!

How can we talk about entering into Lent, when we never really left? That is why we decided our theme this year shouldn't ask much of us. We won't be trying to learn some great spiritual lessons or make even deeper sacrifices. Our theme this year is merely hoping we will ENDURE. Each week, we will look at a different word that represents one aspect of endurance, hoping to encourage one another to hold on so

we can all make it through. The six weeks of Lent that we practice each year in church life are indeed practice for the long slogs that occasionally arise in our lives. We find ourselves in a shared long slog right now, in ways we never could have imagined a year ago. We will celebrate with joy and praise when Easter Sunday comes in April, but we also know the pandemic will not yet be over when Jesus rises from the dead this year. So for now, we focus on how to ENDURE, knowing that our faith offers tools that can help us through.

The context of our lesson today is made up of five different situations of deprivation. Jesus is in the wilderness, fasting. The Israelites are also in the wilderness, and they've run out of water. The widow at the temple treasury has practically nothing with which to support herself. Beyond our scripture lessons, we remember today all the many people around the world struggling to survive disasters and devastation that are touched by the ministry of Week of Compassion. And then there's us. If we're honest, our deprivation is nothing like these other situations, and yet, there is so much that has been taken from us in this moment in history. There is no point in making comparisons, because the spiritual lessons are the same, regardless of the details or depth of the deprivation.

So let's start with Jesus. The way Matthew tells the story, the timing is a little unclear, but we get the impression that the devil waited until he was good and hungry before coming to tempt him. I don't know about you, but I can't deal with much of anything difficult when I'm hungry. It's hard to think about anything except filling

my own belly. And that points us toward the trick the devil is trying to use on Jesus. The approach he uses invites Jesus to focus solely on himself – to feed himself, save himself, empower and glorify himself. This is an easy trap for a hungry person to fall into, but Jesus resists. He knows that he has not been sent to live for himself, but for the sake of the world. He knows that the love he’s been sent to share isn’t self-love but sacrificial love. And so he rejects the temptation of self-service and chooses instead to worship and serve God alone, which as we will see in the following chapters, means loving and serving God’s people. As his ministry unfolded, Jesus had a strong heart-connection to the needs and suffering of all those he met because of his own experience of deprivation in the desert. This points to our word of the day: empathy. It turns out that empathy is a tool of endurance.

Now, we may think of empathy as a compassionate solidarity with those who are suffering from those who are not suffering. But our passages today and our experiences in life show us that empathy doesn’t only come from those who are unafflicted. Empathy for others is still possible even when we ourselves are going through hard times. Indeed, sometimes, it is what helps us get through. It seems to me that knowing he had come to serve others is part of what helped Jesus reject the devil’s self-centered solutions to his problems there in the wilderness. When we are caught in situations of deprivation, we have similar choices.

We could be like the Israelites in the wilderness. We know that water is necessary for life. They were not going to make it unless a spring appeared

somewhere, somehow. But instead of working together to figure out how to find water, or praying fervently to God, the Israelites turned on Moses, and God. The word here translated “quarrel” has litigious implications; it’s like the Israelites were threatening to sue Moses for bringing them into the wilderness and then letting them run out of water. The story also connects forward to Jesus in the wilderness where it accuses the Israelites of putting God to the test, something Jesus resisted doing.

This is one way that people going through difficulty often respond. We look for someone to blame; we put our energy into solutions that absolve us of any responsibility for making things better. We complain and quarrel and attack. It does not occur to us that Moses is thirsty too. This is an example of trying to endure without empathy. It’s important to remember is that despite the Israelites’ failure of faithfulness, God took care of them anyway. Water poured forth from the rock at Horeb, so the people could drink. But their faithlessness, though not punished, was nevertheless remembered, and their journey was made the harder for it.

On the other end of the spectrum is the poor widow from Mark 12. Her entire life was deprivation. For all practical purposes, she had nothing to live on. But she shared her nothing with her whole heart. Instead of getting caught up in blaming or complaining or quarreling, she chose the way of trust. Her faith was such that it caused her own neediness to inspire her to give what she had so all those who were needy could be attended to together. She can be another example for us of how empathy can help us endure deprivation.

So what about us? How can empathy help us endure this strange chapter of history we're living through? I don't know about you, but I've found that one of the most important things I've needed to do lately is practice empathy for myself. In the past couple of months, I've hit a bit of a wall. All those things we heard about early on in the pandemic have finally arrived in my life. I didn't do this much early on, but lately, I'm only putting on "real" clothes on the top, and only on days I have Zoom meetings. I'm wearing less make-up. I'm not baking anymore. And I'm very conscious that I'm less "productive" than I used to be. I've had to find ways to be compassionate with myself. One example is that I've decided to stop feeling guilty about my body's conviction that "morning sleep is the best sleep." I have never been a morning person, but I've spent a lot of my life trying to pretend I am one and a lot of energy feeling shame about my failures at this fool's errand. So lately, as I became aware that this struggle simply wasn't possible anymore, I have just given myself permission to stop trying. I still set my alarm some days, but often for later than feels respectable, and some days I don't set it at all. I still feel the weight of what a privilege it is that I can make this choice for myself, aware that so many do not have that option. But I'm getting more sleep, and it's a necessary blessing.

I wonder what areas of your life could benefit from more empathy. How could you help yourself endure by practicing compassion toward the beloved child of God that is you? This is one of the questions on our ENDURE journaling worksheet, and I encourage you to spend some time contemplating what changes you could make to

give yourself the space or nourishment or support you need to get through, even if it's something that previously felt self-indulgent or frivolous.

Lest we get caught in that trap the devil was setting in the wilderness though, there is another side to this. The second question on our journaling worksheet invites us back into the truer meaning of empathy. One of the best tools for enduring difficulty is to shift the focus off ourselves. The compassion of Jesus calls us to empathy for others who are suffering. One timely example, of course, is all the ways we can help others through giving to the Week of Compassion offering. Whether it's landslide victims in India, or refugees in Lebanon, or people caught without power or water in winter storms in Texas, there are many ways we can practice empathy that also increase our capacity to endure our own hardships. Like the widow in Mark 12, I have seen testimonies from folks who have been helped by Week of Compassion about their subsequent dedication to supporting this ministry so that others will not be left without assistance. But we don't have to go through a disaster to feel for their suffering. Empathy calls us to respond to their needs as if they are our own, even when they aren't. And when we do so, our faith is strengthened and our capacity for endurance increases.

I have told you how devoted I am to morning sleep. It is the best sleep. And yet, every second Saturday of the month, I find that rising before dawn to come here to the church and turn on the coffee maker and unlock the gates, in preparation for our Welcome Saturday guests is not a burden at all. This is how I know that empathy

is a tool of endurance. Even as I have struggled myself in the past couple months, being able to take the focus off myself and serve others in real need has made it possible for me to keep going. And even as I say that, I know that risk levels have taken away this life-giving practice from some of our older Welcome Saturday volunteers. I mourn that loss with you. I will keep working to find ways to fill those gaps. But in the meantime, I invite you to consider Week of Compassion as another outlet for practicing empathy. Bond with that coin box. Don't just drop your spare change in it. Pray with each coin you deposit. Pray for earthquake victims. Pray for hurricane survivors. Pray for girls in need of schooling. Pray for communities struggling to provide clean drinking water for their people, that they might have no need to quarrel and test God.

Empathy will help us endure. Empathy helps us remember that we are in this together. Empathy helps us remember, even when we feel trapped in deprivation ourselves, that we have a lot to offer. Together, we will make it through. Amen.