

**Text:** [Hebrews 4:12-16](#)  
**Date:** September 19, 2021  
**Title:** Practicing Compassion Series, Week 2 > “Understanding with Empathy”  
**Theme:** Understand yourself to look compassionately on others.

Last week, Rachel introduced our series on Practicing Compassion with a message about our need to just “Take a Moment” when emotions are running high

Using an example from Jesus’ life, we talked about how it’s hard to find compassion until you’re able to get back to center

That’s a first step

This week, we want to take that idea even further

And make the point that we can’t practice compassion unless and until we take some time to understand ourselves the way God understands us

**1**

Has the pandemic revealed some of the limitations of your ability to cope?  
Has this past year caused you to see yourself in ways that feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable?

One of the things I’ve noticed in myself is a lot more anxiety  
Maybe that was always there, but I’ve found that I’ve had more and more difficulty controlling my responses to certain situations  
I sometimes overthink myself into a kind of paralysis  
And I just keep saying: this doesn’t feel like me  
I think things through, make a decision, and I move on. What’s happening?

Here’s an example of another thing I’ve noticed – that I just don’t feel as productive as I once did  
I don’t focus as easily, I get worn out more rapidly  
And it’s frustrating, because I always have taken pride in my ability to get things done  
So I find myself asking, “What’s wrong with me?”  
Maybe that’s a conversation you have with yourself too, that “What’s wrong with me? I need to snap out of this.”

If you do, I want you to listen carefully  
I was listening to a podcast the other day, [an interview with a professor of clinical psychology](#) recorded earlier this year  
And her message, in a nutshell, was: “Recognize that you’re not alone in feeling these things. It’s not abnormal at all. When the whole world is going through a crisis, it’s perfectly normal to feel not quite yourself.”

Practicing compassion for others begins with having compassion for yourself  
Not fighting against ourselves, trying to talk ourselves out of responses that are normal and expected

Now, some of us maybe *are* experiencing things we may need a little help to get through – and that’s ok too  
If you feel like that’s where you are, please feel free to reach out to me or Rachel

Where I don’t want us to be is stuck in the space where we just keep trying to talk ourselves out of it, or even just pray ourselves out of it  
That’s not self-compassion  
That’s self-critique  
Because even your prayer will start from the point of saying: “What I’m feeling is a problem...so God, take it away”  
And that approach is not necessarily the most helpful right now

What if, instead of fighting against the things we feel, trying to drive them away, instead we learned to observe them, and even to embrace them for what they teach us?

There is a beautiful poem by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Persian Muslim poet Rumi called “The Guest House,” that illustrates this idea:

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

### 3

We need to pay attention to what's happening in us  
To our emotions  
To the internal dialogue we have with ourselves all through the day  
To the unhealthy behaviors we keep returning to in order to numb  
ourselves  
To images and daydreams that show up in our minds day in and day out  
To sensations we feel in our bodies – tightness in the chest, for example, or  
in the shoulders – upset stomachs and headaches

Instead of just taking some Tums or ibuprofen or whatever we need to get  
through, what if we tried to listen to what our bodies were telling us?  
To try and better understand ourselves  
Because how can we ever hope to understand and empathize with others  
until we can understand and empathize with ourselves?

Jesus talks about this in his teaching about hypocrisy  
He's coming at it from a different angle, but the principle is the same

He says that if you ever want to remove the speck from someone else's eye, you've first got to remove the log from your own eye (Matthew 7:5, Luke 6:42)

I read that as: we can't deal with anyone else until we first deal with ourselves

And for Jesus, dealing with sin and brokenness is always a movement of compassion

It's always about God's mercy flowing over us, which causes our hearts to overflow with mercy for others

#### 4

There is a book that goes along with this series, that is the basis of this series, in fact: [Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus](#)

It's by Frank Rogers, Jr. who teaches at Claremont School of Theology  
And in his book, Professor Rogers shares some personal stories that get at how this move from compassion for self to compassion for others works

He talks about loaning his car to his young adult son, who was on break from college

The only requirement he had: if you want to use the car, you have to pick Dad up from work at 6:00

Some context: the prior summer when he said the same thing, his son was perpetually late

And he talks about the experience of his anger and frustration rising when it got to be 6:05, 6:10 and his son still hadn't shown up

No call, no text, no nothing

And he describes the thoughts that accompanied the feeling: "How can this kid be so irresponsible? I asked him to do ONE SIMPLE THING!"

All that kind of stuff. Sound familiar?

Anyway, he found himself getting more and more worked up, eager for his son to show up so he could give him a piece of his mind

But after taking a moment to breathe and get some distance (remember last week's message?)

He was able to get into a different place

A place where he could actually welcome this feeling of anger

To observe it rather than feeling totally overcome by it

And get curious about what it might be saying to him  
Just like in the poem

Not just waiting there on the street to blow up the minute he got in the car  
Not trying to talk himself out of the feeling by judging it, like “I shouldn’t be  
so angry, this is dumb”

Or, “What’s wrong with you? You literally wrote the book on compassion”  
But remembering that our feelings are there for a reason

That they’re meant to tell us something

To open us up to a new understanding, IF we can just be curious enough  
What’s this anger about?

Is there a fear behind it? Is there a memory here of something that hurts?

And there WAS a memory there

Of a time when Professor Rogers was a kid

Eleven years old, waiting to be picked up after a swim meet

By mom, who had forgotten him

It’s dark, it’s cold, and he’s just waiting outside

Feeling alone and forgotten and abandoned

And THAT’S what the anger is about

When his son doesn’t show up

When he doesn’t text or call

He’s that 11-year-old kid again

Once he understands that, he begins to see the anger for what it is:

A cry for compassion inside him

A plea to remember that 11-year-old

If we want to learn to be compassionate toward others, we first must learn  
to be compassionate with ourselves

And when Dr. Rogers does that, when he *doesn’t* blow up at his son but  
instead calmly explains why his son’s lateness has this triggering  
effect on him, they have a deeper conversation

And what he finds out in that sharing is the reason his son is late:

He’s in love

Every day, he drops his girlfriend off for work at six before coming to get  
Dad

His son didn’t want to say anything, because the relationship was new

But Dad's act of compassion – first for himself and then for his son – led to  
a deeper connection, a deeper sharing  
Had Dad blown up, none of that would have been possible

## 5

This is the Spirit of Christ at work  
It's compassion in us overflowing into the world

It's the calling of the high priest who becomes the sacrifice  
The high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses

Christ never lived in a spirit of condemnation  
But instead an openness to and love for people  
Even on the cross  
Remember what he says in Luke's gospel?  
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?"

We so often find it hard to show compassion on ourselves because we  
don't trust God to have that kind of compassion on us  
We think that before God loves us, we have to be better

But that's never been the point

God already knows us!  
"Before God, no creature is hidden...but everything is exposed to the eyes  
of the one to whom we have to give an answer."  
We spend so much of our time trying to talk ourselves out of certain  
feelings, certain reactions, criticizing them and telling ourselves that  
they're all wrong  
But God has already seen us. Fully.  
We're not kidding our Creator  
So what if our reactions to the world are meant to tell us something?  
What if they're meant to be occasions for the kind of self-compassion that  
will lead us toward a more compassionate, more empathetic  
understanding of others?

Amen.

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