

INTO THE FRAY: THREATS AND HOW WE FACE THEM

The Eclipse of Empathy

John 11:32-34, 38-39, 43

November 2, 2025

Grief is love seeking someplace to land. It is our refusal to let what was once precious come to nothing.

George Saunders' novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* haunts me this week. In the story, the souls of the dead speak from beyond the grave. "What I mean to say is, we had been considerable. Had been loved. Our departures caused pain. Those who loved us sat upon their beds, heads in hand; lowered their faces to tabletops, making animal noises. We had been loved, I say, and remembering us, even many years later, people would smile, briefly gladdened at the memory."

Some of you feel this like a stone in your chest. You sat on your bed this year, head in hands. Or stood at the graveside and watched the earth receive what you could not release. That terrible finality. In a few moments, we'll read names out loud, the saints we've lost this year at Second. And as we do, we will whisper names in our own hearts. We will remember. We will smile. We will weep.

That's what today is for. To say before God and one another that our loved ones were considerable. That their departures caused us pain. To name what we have lost in sacred community.

But there is another grief today. It threatens the witness of the saints we honor. There is a rising meanness dressed in Christian language. There is callousness called conviction. Empathy labeled toxic or sinful. Compassion called dangerous. Care for the vulnerable makes us naïve. We must choose truth over feeling. I want to be clear about what this costs us.

The logical effect of this theology is monstrous. It says, "Care less. Feel less. Weep less for others." But scripture has a name for one whose heart is hardened

in the face of human suffering. Pharaoh. He heard the cries of the enslaved, and he felt nothing.

Now, God heard their cries, and God moved toward them in compassion. It is a familiar story, repeated throughout the pages of sacred scripture. In the psalms we hear God's steadfast love will last forever. God's compassion has no end. In the prophets, we learn that God prefers mercy over ritual. And in the gospels, we hear the good news that God is found not in total victory but in utter vulnerability.

The arc of our scripture bends toward empathy. And so, to attack it is an assault on the image of God in one another. To turn from compassion does not just fail to grasp who we are; it fundamentally misrepresents who God is.

Where in the Gospel does Jesus say to his disciples, "Be careful not to care too much?" You can look. You will not find it.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another.

Jesus showed us the way. He drew close to suffering souls and broken bodies. He washed the feet of his friends. And never—not once—did Jesus Christ put a cap on our empathy.

Lazarus had been dead for four days. The tomb smelled like death, and there was no fixing this. Jesus arrives, and Mary falls at his feet, still raw in grief and disappointed in her lord. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And then it happens. Not the miracle. Not yet. First, Jesus weeps. He grieves his friend Lazarus. And I

cannot prove it, but I do wonder: What if Jesus could not call Lazarus forth out of the tomb without first descending into his own grief? What if the tears were not a delay but a necessity? What if Jesus had to let death break his heart before he could break death's power?

Afterall, this is the grammar of resurrection. There is incarnation before glory. Descent before rising. Tears before new life.

It's how God always works. Jesus does not bypass the tomb—he enters it. Doesn't avoid the tears—he feels them. And only then, from deep within his own grief, does Jesus speak life. And so, I submit that we cannot follow a Christ who descended into death if we keep ourselves distant from suffering. That without weeping, there will be no raising.

You cannot claim to follow Christ and refuse to do what he did. You cannot worship a God who wept at the tomb and call weeping weakness. You must choose to follow Jesus to the place where hearts break, or follow a god of ruthless power. But do not call that the way of Christ.

If you look around, you will see it, this eclipse of empathy. It says, "Harden your heart and call that strength." It mocks compassion, makes cruelty entertaining. Says, "Don't care. Don't feel. Don't weep."

But, friends, eclipses are optical illusions. The light is still there. Our call is to shine, not adjust to the darkness.

You can be certain of your theology and still have a heart of stone. You can quote chapter and verse from the good book and feel nothing for the people God loves. You can do it, but you will miss Jesus, because he is standing outside the tomb, weeping tears for his friend. And the saints, they know where to find him.

For decades, a small group of men in my previous congregation gathered every Thursday morning to cook breakfast and pray together. Ted Bayley was one of those men. Ted Bayley was one of that church's saints. An elder in the church, he came every

Thursday morning for as long as his health allowed. And when he was no longer able to drive, he would walk the short path from his house to the church. It was one of the final paths Ted knew how to walk. He suffered with dementia that slowly stole his memory. Not long after his diagnosis, on a Thursday morning, Ted showed up for breakfast. That day, when his turn came, he prayed these words: "Dear God, they tell me my memory is failing, and I'm afraid. Yes, God, I'm afraid. I'm afraid that I won't recognize my friends. I'm afraid that I won't remember their names."

The group sat in silence. Ed Carithers sat across the table, next up to pray. Ed could have said, "Now Ted, don't talk like that. You're fine. We all forget things sometimes." Ed could have changed the subject, prayed about something else entirely. But he didn't do that. Ed sat there. Across from his buddy Ted. And as he began his prayer, his voice cracked. "Father God, please help Ted to know that even if he forgets who we are, we will remember who he is. And so will you."

It's way of the saints. The truth of the gospel. Remember. Remember. Remember. Empathy is not weakness. It is the strength that shows up for a friend in need. It is the courageous witness of unguarded tears. It is the bold heart of our call to one another.

There's a food pantry downstairs. Serves 750 families a month. And right now—right now—they are preparing for more people than they've seen in many years. More need. More hunger. More neighbors who don't know where their next meal will come from.

As systems meant to protect the most vulnerable are being threatened, programs disrupted, workers unpaid, here's what we will do. We will open our doors wider. We will brace for the demand, and we will meet each person who comes through those doors with dignity and, yes, empathy.

Some Christian voices are writing books and preaching sermons, calling empathy dangerous. Toxic. They say it compromises our convictions, or perhaps

it risks rewarding the undeserving, making suckers out of those who practice it.

You know what I believe? I believe that is the bitter fruit of a false gospel, that we can reject the lie that our neighbor's need is not our problem. The cry of the stranger is not a nuisance. It is a summons. Scripture is clear on this point. Their cry is God's voice. And if you listen closely, you will hear your name.

By God's grace, we have capacity to respond. By God's word, we are compelled to respond. And by God, we will respond. It's the work of the saints, to know where Jesus stands—not by the throne, but at the tomb, weeping, before he calls us to life.

Lazarus, come out!

Not by brute force, but by the tenderness of love, death will be defeated.

And so, we remember the saints. I remember Ted and Ed, who joined hands in prayer across the breakfast table. We remember Mary and Martha, joined in their grief by a God who wept with them. We remember the saints today. We remember those who showed us the way, who held us up, who found courage when it mattered most.

A great cloud of witnesses surrounds you today. And you should let their lives speak in yours.

They refused to harden their hearts. They loved and were loved. They were considerable. And today, the saints stand against empathy's eclipse. Their light still shines. And their voices whisper in our ears, "Now it's your turn."

Do not make peace with darkness. Follow Jesus to the tomb. Stand outside in your tears, and keep showing up. Don't look away. Remember those who came before you. Mark the path for those who will follow after you. Friends, if we turn from the cries of our neighbors, we turn from the Christ who weeps beside them. Listen. Without weeping, there is no raising.

Let us pray: God who weeps with us, teach us to weep with each other. Form in us the heart of Christ. Amen.