



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## “Failing Empathy”

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Rev. Erica Knisely  
March 22, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** Mark 14:32-42 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Then they came to a place named Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, “Sit down here while I pray.” Jesus took along with him Peter, James and John. Then he began to be very distressed and troubled, and said to them, “My heart is filled with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch.” Jesus went a little further off and fell to the ground, praying that if it were possible this hour might pass him by. He said, “God, you have the power to do all things. Take this cup away from me. But let it be not my will, but your will.” When Jesus returned he found them guard and pray that you not be put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Going back again, Jesus began to pray in the same words. Upon returning Jesus found them asleep once again. They could not keep their eyes open, nor did they know what to say to him. He returned a third time and said, “Still sleeping? Still taking your rest? It will have to do. The hour is upon us—the Chosen One is being handed into the clutches of evildoers. Get up, let’s go. Look! Here comes my betrayer.”*

## Sermon

Easter is in a couple of weeks, and we have been leading up to Easter by telling some of the stories of the last days of Jesus: the Last Supper, the betrayal, and today's story is from the Garden of Gethsemane. That's right after Jesus leaves the Last Supper when Judas goes off to betray him, and he goes with disciples into the garden and to pray.

Let’s see the picture.



This is from a 6th century illuminated manuscript, the Rossano Gospels, and this contains little vignettes from the life of Christ along with pictures. And when I was looking at artwork for today's message, this is the one that really struck me as kind of embodying the pathos of this passage.

You see on the right side back there Jesus laying down prostrate, praying, and then there's this huge separation between him and the disciples who are kind of— they've been worn out over time, but he's sort of leaning over them telling them to wake up. But there's this, just this vast darkness between them and even an outcropping of rock that separates them. Jesus has asked them to stay awake and watch, and yet they have fallen asleep. He's on his own, isolated, in agony, let down by those who were there, his closest companions, and in pain. And I wonder if you've ever been in that place where you feel utterly alone and in pain, and no one seems to understand or be able to relate.

And then you have the disciples who have fallen asleep. They fall asleep multiple times in this story. Jesus has said, you know, "*Stay awake, watch, I'm in agony even to the point of death,*" and yet they fall asleep. And sometimes I think this story is told like the disciples are just kind of weak, you know, just can't quite stay awake, they're just failing.

But I think there's something more to this story that if you look at the Greek, it talks about their eyelids being pressed down from an outside force, like just weighed down. And it says they don't know how to respond, they don't know what to say. And I think we've experienced that too when there's someone that we love or care about who's in pain and we don't know what to say. It can feel like a weight in our own bodies.

And so, I have a lot of understanding for these disciples who keep falling asleep. And I don't know where you might find yourself in this story today, whether it's here or here or really just as somebody looking at the whole picture, but I want to invite us to really enter into this story and imagine this story together.

So, Jesus says to them, "*My soul is engulfed in sorrow, even to the death. Remain here and watch.*" But why? Why witness his suffering? I think there's something fundamental about the human experience that longs for presence, that longs for a witness, for someone to understand and really just to be with you in it, to *feel* with you in what you're feeling. Especially when we're in pain. We're hardwired for connection. I mean, we even have mirror neurons that help us learn to interpret one another's actions, intentions, to feel each other's feelings, to literally resonate with one another on a neural level in our bodies.

And why are we wired this way? Scientists think this is really the basis for morality, for right and wrong and relationships and the whole functioning of society. It's an essential aspect of what it means to be human, to literally feel with one another, to have a presence that isn't a distanced observation but is more connected.

In this story, when Jesus says, "*I'm in agony, remain awake and watch,*" it's an invitation into his experience. We call this *affective empathy*, when you literally feel someone else's feelings. Why didn't the disciples do that? Why did they fall asleep?

I think dealing with others in pain can be a really overwhelming experience. It can be draining, it can be confusing, it can be threatening even. And here are these disciples in the story. Jesus for them is the liberator. He's the hope for the future, for the restoration of Israel, for good being restored to them. He's their friend, he's their teacher, and yet here's this person who seems to be in agony. It doesn't make sense with how they understand Jesus. It's not part of the worldview of the story that they've been telling themselves.

And so if you have a friend, a family member, a teacher, a mentor, someone that you look up to, a parent, who kind of grounds your well-being in the world, who gives you hope, and you see that person in agony and doubt and despair, that can really upset your whole understanding of the story that you're living in and create deep dissonance and friction within.

Whether it's the pain of a friend or a family member or a neighbor, it's really difficult to stay awake. My goodness, it's hard these days. It's like day after day; there's wound after wound after wound. It's too much.

As humans, we're wired for this kind of understanding connection with one another. It's how we are made. But as humans, we're also finite, we have limits. We can't feel it all the time. Sometimes we need to rest. I think that was what Jim's prayer was about in large part today, to have sympathy, kindness for yourself when you need to rest, when you don't know what to say or how to respond, when it's too much.

But there's also always something nudging us to wake back up. There's always that picture of Jesus sort of nudging the disciples, wake, wake up, wake up, try again, try again to stay awake. And I think that ability to stay present to pain, to stay awake, to empathize is a skill that we can work on, an ability we can hone and develop.

It's a muscle that we can strengthen by practicing it. And I think we need practices like prayer or meditation or yoga to help us sit with it, to help us process it in our bodies, because we *feel* it in our bodies. We can *feel* the pain.

I was reading something from a humanitarian aid worker. Her name is Marian Elliott, and she was talking about how she kind of keeps that balance as she's going into disaster zones and doing very intensive humanitarian work. And she said:

*“One of the most dreadful things about this work is that you're confronted by a need that is much greater than your capacity. Often there's so little that you could do, but yoga helps me in learning to just sit, sit with all this suffering and bring presence to it and feel. And I feel it was really my meditation practice through yoga that I was able to do that without being overwhelmed by pain or feeling that I'd have an impulse to withdraw.”*

We need things to help us metabolize the feelings. It does take intention and it takes effort. And it's important because the alternative to staying awake and present to what's going on around us in the world and even in our closest companions is to fall asleep.

The way it's talked about in this story in the scripture is that when it says the disciples fell asleep, it was sort of a “figurative” death, like a “waking” death. And I think that's what it's like when we shut it all out and shut down, is that we're kind of walking around like we're in a movie. So, it's surreal. And if we want to be spiritually alive, we have to stay awake somehow. Sometimes we need to rest, but there's always the invitation to wake back up.

And there are also those who *choose* to look away. It can feel threatening when someone else's pain, especially someone who has a very different experience than yours, challenges how you think about the world and your place in it. The best example I can think of is being a white person and listening to the pain of people of color.

Listening to my friend in the same workplace talk about her experience and how it differed. All the slights, the aggressions, all the ways she was overlooked or not trusted. Listening to the pain of living with a threat of violence that I never experience on a daily, monthly, yearly basis. The way it feels different watching police brutality in the news for someone who looks like the person being harmed.

That kind of experience is really intense. You literally can feel that pain in your body if you're awake to it. And it can cause all sorts of dissonance, like what does it mean that we inhabit the same space, but I didn't see that? Who am I? Am I okay? Am I a good person? I mean, it creates all of these thoughts. How is this the world? I thought the world was like this, but really, it's not...

It takes patience and compassion with yourself as you're working through this. It's really a breaking open of your heart, your mind, your understanding, but it's not a breaking down. It's really just an expansion, an expansion of your ability to understand and to love and to act with true compassion for others. And a lot of times people just look away or they stop in the middle of that process, and they don't push through the pain and integrate the experience into their lives.

There are also those who just refuse to be present to the pain of others. People who call empathy a “sin.” And we're hearing this from people in our current administration. We hear it from Christian Nationalists saying that empathy makes them weak, unable to make the hard decisions, that somehow feeling what others feel clouds moral reasoning or makes one vulnerable to manipulation. Or perhaps some of them are unable to empathize in the first place.

But this is precisely how folks end up creating detention centers run by for-profit institutions that pack people into cages with food that isn't fit for your family pet, treat them like they're nothing, don't listen to their cries for medical assistance, for basic human dignity.

It's also how we bomb a school full of girls in Iran and just refuse to talk about it. It's how people call it an unfortunate consequence of a war that isn't necessary and it's not advised in the first place. It's how immorality gets twisted and called virtue, that refusing to be present to the pain of others. It's a way of choosing death over life.

But there's a better and harder path, that path of staying awake, waking back up again and again and again and practicing presence to pain.

What if *you're* the one in pain? What if *you're* the one who isn't being heard? What if you're the one who's been abandoned, and people don't know what to say or they refuse to feel your pain? What if you find yourself like Jesus, prostrate, praying in the darkness, alone. Where is the hope when you're in that place?

One of the big ideas in the Christian Scriptures is this idea of the divine, the incalculable, unnameable, infinite being born into the finite. It's that story that we tell at Christmas, "*O come, Emmanuel, God with us.*" It's a mystery, it's a story of divine love taking on human shape in order to be with us in the entire completeness of our human experience, to empathize, to feel with *all* the way down and *all* the way through our entire human experience, even an experience of agony and sorrow and death.

We come to this story believing different things, having different perspectives, but I think there's something true here that resonates and can resonate with all of us that somehow, even in those moments where we're completely alone, love is there. There is some *thing*, some *love* that knows us and feels us and feels *with* us in that experience.

To sum this up, I think rather than empathy making you weak and subject to manipulation, as some people would claim, empathy really requires an enormous amount of inner strength. It takes practice, it takes courage. It's not for the faint of heart or the insecure of mind. To take on someone else's perspective, to feel their pain in your own body, can cause a breaking open of our understanding and our worldview. But that's precisely how we make more room for love.

And there's incredible power in the idea of the infinite taking on finite form to be with us fully and completely, to empathize with our experience, that even in our most difficult moments, we're not alone. We *are* known and we *are* loved, and because of that, *we* are able to love.

I invite you to your own reflection on this story.

## Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

If anyone listening today is feeling lost or alone in your sorrow and pain, I would remind all of us that each of us is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful world and tell everyone you know that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

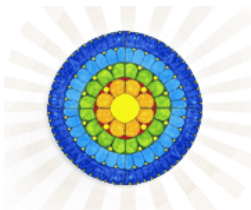
## *Our Vision Statement*

*St. Andrews will be a church that celebrates and lives Christ's universal love in the modern world.*

## *Our Mission Statement*

*The mission of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church is to learn and teach the radical and universal love of Jesus Christ by:*

- ❖ Nurturing individual spirituality and growth*
- ❖ Fostering a community that shares and celebrates the circle of life*
- ❖ Providing space and time for personal and communal reverence*
- ❖ Championing the cause of human-kind and courageously acting to overcome injustice*



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