

He's There



For You and With You

G R E G A L B R E C H T

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.” *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Job’s friends sat on the ground with him as Job grieved the tragic and sudden death of all his children while he stoically endured his own health crisis consisting of “painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head” (Job 2:7). Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar said nothing to Job for seven

days and nights because they saw “how great his suffering was” (Job 2:13). They offered a comforting presence, but then, when they finally spoke, they provided a textbook example of failing to climb into the skin of someone who is suffering pain and heartache.

Job needed encouragement, but all he received was condemnation. Assuming God was punishing Job, Job’s friends jumped to a religious conclusion (of course neither you nor I have ever done such a thing!) and on that basis critiqued and judged Job. Perhaps it was Job who first coined the phrase “with friends like these, who needs enemies?”

When contemporary Jews read this story about Job and

his friends, they no doubt think of their custom of grieving death, known as *sitting shiva*. *Shiva* is the Hebrew word for seven, and thus this Jewish custom involves a period of one week when family gathers around a close family member when grieving the death of a loved one.

The custom is called *sitting shiva* because those who mourn with the person who has suffered a loss sit on low stools or even on the floor, and in so doing 1) they symbolically depict the emotional reality of being brought low by grief and 2) they portray their connection with the one who is grieving. *Sitting shiva* is one example of climbing inside the skin of

...AND THEY SHALL CALL
HIM EMMANUEL, WHICH
BEING INTERPRETED IS,
God with us.

—MATTHEW 1:23, KJV



another and walking around, in an attempt to connect and to reach out with love and support.

The protocol involved in *sitting shiva* with those who are grieving is to remain silent unless the person who is suffering deep pain and loss begins a conversation, and thereby indicates that they want to talk.

Such a protocol helps to safeguard against offensive, silly and even deeply painful things from being said when one is searching for “the right thing” to say.

Contemporary rabbis explain that *sitting shiva* is not for the dead; it’s for the living.

In our 21st century North American culture we often hear

someone expressing gratitude for a friend/spouse/sibling who is “always there” for them. During our own dark and difficult times, a friend or family member who is “always there” is willing to spend time with us on the phone, to meet us and share a cup of coffee and to just be with us, even *if there are no words*. Someone who is “always there” identifies with us enough to be with us and they are often said to have *empathy*.

Sympathy and Empathy

The classic definition of *sympathy* is similar to *empathy* in the sense that it also describes the connection between people when both have similar feelings and experiences. Sometimes the two words are used as synonyms, and while there are aspects of *empathy* and *sympathy* that are synonymous, there are also critical differences in the definitions of these two words as we use them today.

Empathy is the emotional reality that happens when one

about and acknowledging the reality experienced by another.

Sympathy involves feeling badly about suffering experienced by another.

Empathy involves identifying with the feelings and experiences of another in such a way that one is infused by, permeated with and steeped in similar feelings, emotions and experiences of the person who is suffering.

Empathy is all about a choice to feel the pain of another, rather than simply knowing about/acknowledging that pain.

Sympathy and empathy can be progressive stages, with *sympathy* as the first emotional response one has before one might progress to empathy. Sadly, many people in our me-first world of this 21st century seem to seldom feel or express *sympathy*, but even when *sympathy* is expressed and experienced, it is even more rare that it matures into *empathy*.

Sympathy feels FOR another whereas *empathy* feels WITH another.

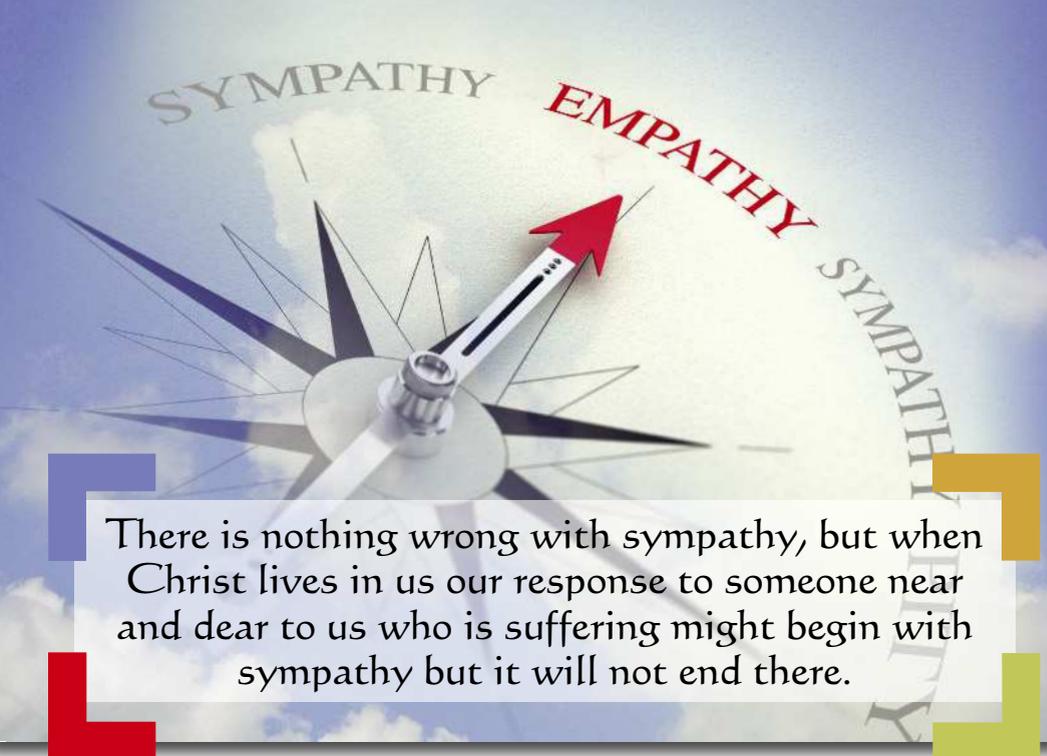
Sympathy alone can lead to actions that are not productive or helpful—for example, we might feel sympathetic for a

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imports the feelings, emotions and experiences of another into one’s own life. When a person has empathy they either have experienced or express and communicate a desire to enter into, in some way, the suffering or pain of another.

Sympathy involves knowing

person who is panhandling. Feeling badly FOR the person and perhaps feeling guilty that you are not experiencing the hard times he or she is, you give a panhandler some money which they may promptly use to feed their alcohol or drug addiction.



Expressing sympathy alone can enable one to encounter suffering, and then move on with life unencumbered by the difficult situation that presents itself.

Empathy, on the other hand, is no quick or easy transaction—among other things, empathy is not fully transmitted via monetary means. Empathy normally means moving out of a “comfort zone.” When we express, communicate and impart empathy, the physical and/or emotional-spiritual distance between us and the person with whom we empathize is

There is nothing wrong with sympathy, but when Christ lives in us our response to someone near and dear to us who is suffering might begin with sympathy but it will not end there.

In such a situation, *sympathy* also allows us to escape from an uncomfortable situation. Because it is uncomfortable to be in the presence of need and pain, our sympathetic emotions make us easier prey for beggars to get what they want—which in the case of an addict is another hit or high to help them, in turn, escape their own pain.

A beggar who wants to escape his/her pain might be playing/preying upon another, manipulating them into sympathizing with what might be or seem to be dire straits. However, the person who might express *sympathy* toward a beggar, in the form of a monetary gift, may actually be motivated to do so by their own guilt more than their desire to help someone in need.

Sympathetic reactions to beggars and monetary transactions that follow are usually quick and anonymous. In many North American urban settings, a *sympathetic transaction* might take place as the beggar stands on a traffic

island between several lanes of cars going in opposite directions. The driver of a car waiting for the light to turn green may extend a dollar bill out the window, sympathetically helping the person who seems to be in need. In such a case *sympathy* is convenient for the driver of the car—no time is necessary to get to know the person who appears to be in need or pain—

just a dollar or two held out a car window. Then, in a few seconds, often after a quick “God bless you” on the part of the recipient, the *sympathetic transaction* is completed.

A *sympathetic transaction* involves a payback—an immediate release of pressure or obligation—the sympathetic act makes the person imparting help in such a way feel better.

narrowed. We sit down and spend time with the person in need. We feel WITH them rather than simply feeling FOR them.

Walt Whitman described *empathy*: “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels; I become the wounded person.”

Through his business interests in South Africa, Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) became

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one of the richest men in the world (the former Rhodesia was named after him). Rhodes believed in proper etiquette and was always appropriately dressed for the occasion. The story is told of a young man who had been invited for a formal dinner party at Rhodes’ home. The young man neglected to allow for enough time in his travel plans and

A person who empathizes WITH you vicariously enters into your sufferings and pain with you...

arrived in town only a few minutes before the dinner was scheduled to begin. He had no time to change from his casual, wrinkled travel clothing.

As a butler ushered him into the opulent mansion, the young man became acutely aware that his fears had come to pass—compared to everyone else, he looked like he was dressed like one of the gardeners of the fabulous estate. All the guests were attired in formal wear, while the young man was still wearing his wrinkled suit in which he had slept and traveled.

After what seemed like a long time, Cecil Rhodes walked down his grand staircase, and his guests were amazed to see him wearing a shabby and wrinkled old suit. The young man later learned that Rhodes had been attired in formal evening wear, and was at the far end of the room when he saw the embarrassing predicament of his young guest. Rhodes had quietly excused himself and changed his clothing to make his under-dressed guest feel comfortable, at ease and welcome.

Rhodes did not simply feel FOR the acute embarrassment his young guest felt—he determined to feel WITH him, and in so doing evidenced the heart and soul of Jesus, who came to be one of us, exactly like us, inside the same skin, wearing the same clothing, breathing the same air, eating the same food, experiencing the same pains and heartaches.

Jesus came as one of us to be WITH us.

Empathy and Sympathy in a Health Crisis

To further illustrate the differences between feeling WITH (*sympathy*) and feeling FOR (*empathy*), let's assume you are living with a serious, perhaps terminal health issue. One of your friends or family members might sympathize with you in that they acknowledge your condition. They may be able to recite a dictionary like-definition of your medical condition. They may even take the time to gain more knowledge so that they can accurately describe your pain and suffering. Because they know about and recognize the severity of your situation they comfort and encourage you in a variety of ways. They feel FOR you.

Sympathy may also mean that friends/family members actively respond to you. They may send flowers, cards and even make meals and deliver them. A sympathetic person

"I do not ask the wounded person how he feels; I become the wounded person."

— *Empathy* described by Walt Whitman

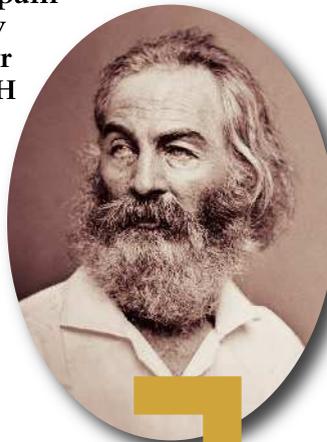
may call you on the phone. But someone's identification and connection to you ends with *sympathy* if they merely feel FOR you but they won't "sit with you" for hours and hours on end. It is neither easy nor quick for someone to

"climb inside another person's skin and walk around."

However, when a friend or family member not only sympathizes, when they not only feel FOR you but when they feel WITH you, their feelings spring from a deeper spiritual place, and as a result they empathize with you. When someone empathizes they personally relate WITH you perhaps because they or someone close to them has experienced and endured the same thing you have.

A person who empathizes WITH you not only sympathizes FOR you because they know all about the condition facing you, they will consciously make the choice to move closer to you, to be present WITH you. **A person who empathizes WITH you vicariously enters into your sufferings and pain with you—they experience your sufferings WITH you.**

My wife, Karen, has had three horrific encounters with cancer. She had surgery on one side of



her neck for head and neck cancer in 2002, and then again in 2010 another far more complicated surgery on the other side of her neck for the same kind of cancer. Following the second surgery Karen endured, five days a week for a

period of six and one half weeks, the hell of having radiation oncologists incinerate and scorch her head, neck, throat and

necessary, another kind of radiation (cyber-knife) after that.

We had hoped that the cancer was gone. We had hoped that we would never

her, feeling WITH her. In most of those cases the people who were able to impart *empathy* had either personally experienced some similar terminal situation, or they had endured something similar with a close family member or friend. It seemed that they were able to give *empathy* because they had the abilities and resources to do so. Many of them knew that the most desperately needed support at such a time isn't just promising to say a prayer or light a candle, send flowers or cards or deliver meals—although those expressions are wonderful and helpful.

Many of those who empathized knew that it's all about "being there"—feeling WITH in addition to feeling FOR. *Empathy* is all about the choice of living WITH the life situation of another, the willingness to join oneself to another to be WITH them.

Counter-Productive Non-Empathetic Words

There were times during Karen's ordeals with cancer when she wanted to talk, and then there were times when she wanted people, including myself, to just be WITH her. There were times when *there were no words*—there were times when she was all talked out—there were times that nothing more could be said,



"The Power of Empathy"—an online video from the Royal Society for the Arts and Brené Brown

Author and professor Brené Brown explains the difference between *sympathy* and *empathy*.

mouth. She wanted to quit many times during this ordeal, but somehow, by God's grace, she continued the course of treatment.

A little less than four years later, in January 2014, a regular scan that is a part of her ongoing surveillance program revealed a lesion on Karen's lung—and the follow up biopsy revealed that it was a malignant carcinoma. It was the same exact kind of cancer she had endured previously. The cancer we had hoped had been completely annihilated by the hell of radiation had somehow survived and moved (metastasized) to another part of her body.

We went back to the drawing boards. A board of doctors examined her tests and her history and recommended 12 weeks of chemotherapy and, if

again have to deal with this particular problem—but the cancer was back. So once again, we climbed into the boxing ring for round three—and once again the treatment protocol Karen received knocked her down, but she got up time after time. Bloodied and beaten and finally bald, she endured the ravages of chemotherapy.

In the presence of pain and grief, some people feel a religious compulsion to discuss and explain what they believe to be God's will.

During all three of these rounds we had incredible support. We experienced many examples of what Karen felt as *empathy*—people who "sat" with

and there were times when anything at all that could be said would be inconsequential, perhaps trivial and even counter-productive. There were times

when *sitting shiva* was the best.

Well-meaning individuals, driven by the desire to say something that would somehow fix or improve Karen's health or emotional well being would suggest alternative treatments that they believed to be superior to the medical treatment we had chosen.

In so doing, without realizing they were doing so, they were judging the decision and course of action we had taken, essentially saying we could have made a better and wiser choice. In some cases, such advice seemed to imply that had we correctly chosen this course of treatment we were now hearing about, Karen would not have been experiencing the hell she was.

Some well-intentioned people, searching for the "right" things to say often said something like "I know how you feel." But those can be heard as empty words uttered by someone who really has no idea at all! Ironically, those who really did seem to know something of how Karen felt explained that they had a past encounter with a situation *something like* the one she was enduring, and they said things like "as a result, I have a little bit of an idea about how you must be feeling."

Of course, Karen and I have learned over many years to translate the intent of a person who wants to say they care but chooses inadequate ways and words to do so.

In the presence of pain and grief, some people feel a religious compulsion to discuss and explain what they believe to be God's will. People may announce that a specific event is or was God's will—but what may be intended as an

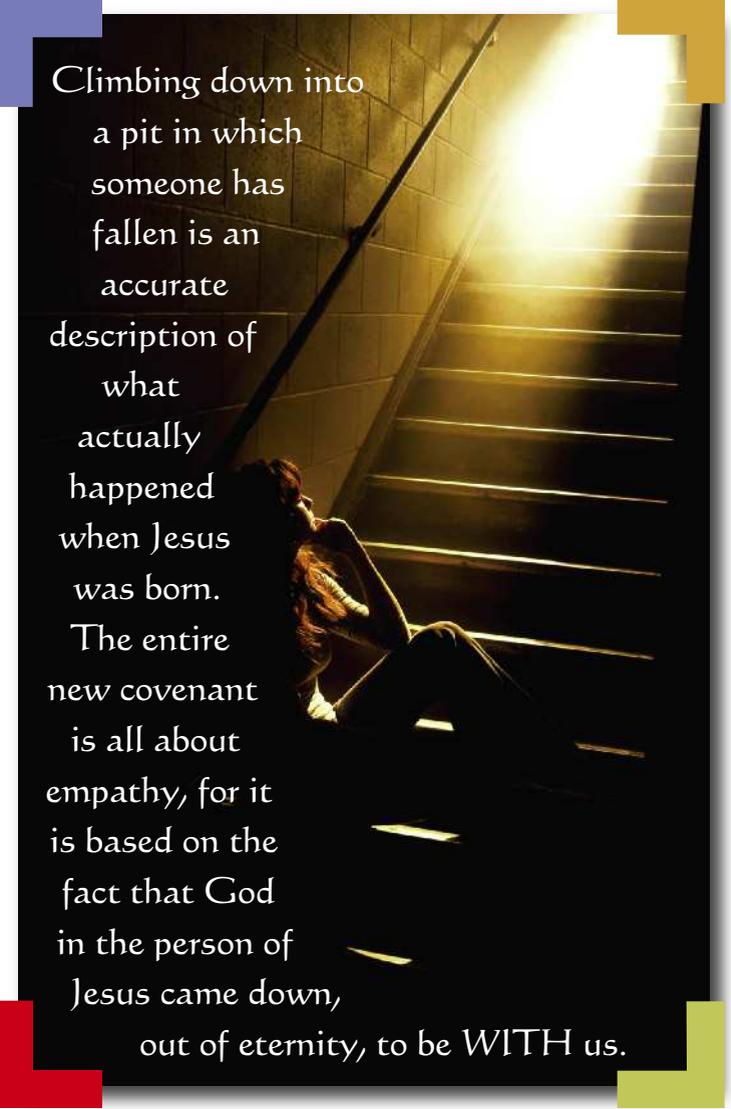
enlightened announcement may not only be grossly incorrect, but can strike those who are suffering as disingenuous and arrogant.

Sometimes, in the presence of pain and heartache, a person might attempt to comfort another by reminding them that things could be worse. In such cases, the "assurance" might begin with the phrase "at least"—"*at least* you have some friends who care for you—when I had an operation no one even visited me"

[said at the bedside of a person recovering from a surgery for cancer]. Sometimes a person may determine that the person who is suffering needs to quit feeling sorry for themselves and will thus assure the person in pain that "We all have our problems, you know."

Climbing Down Into the Pit

The Royal Society for the Arts produced a video animation (available online) based on a lecture given by author and professor Brené Brown during which she explained the difference between *sympathy* and *empathy*. The animation depicts a fox falling to the bottom of a deep pit. The bear is a friend of



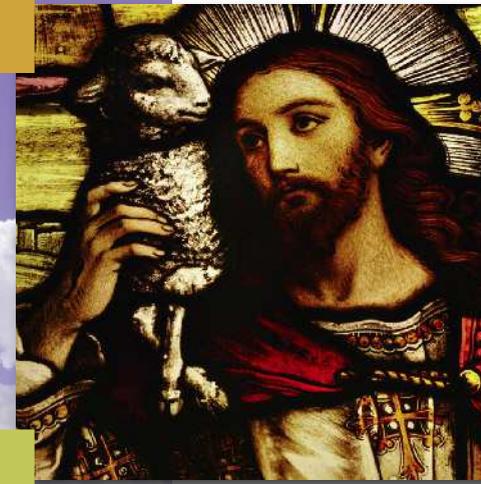
Climbing down into a pit in which someone has fallen is an accurate description of what actually happened when Jesus was born. The entire new covenant is all about empathy, for it is based on the fact that God in the person of Jesus came down, out of eternity, to be WITH us.

the fox, and knowing his friend is in pain, in a dark and lonely place friend, the bear climbs down into the pit with him and says, "I know what it's like down here. You are not alone."

The fox has another friend, a gazelle. The gazelle proves to be more like an acquaintance—we might call the gazelle a "fair weather" friend. The gazelle walks by and hears sounds from the bottom of the pit, so she leans over and looks down from the top of the pit, from the place where the fox fell, and observes her "friend" the fox suffering. "Ooh, that looks bad," the gazelle says. "I've got a sandwich, do you want me to send it down to you?"



There was a distance between God and humanity in the old covenant—in fact the distance was prescribed and enforced. But God came near and he sat down WITH us in the new covenant.



encounter a physical or spiritual

God came near and he sat down WITH us in the new covenant.

One of the most loved of all the parables of Jesus expresses the *empathy* of the Good Samaritan who stopped what he was doing to be WITH the person who had been left for dead (Luke 10:30-37). On the other hand, religious professionals that the original readers and listeners of this parable would have expected to render significant service failed to make the effort. Two religious leaders saw the plight

brother or sister who is destitute, in immediate need of food and warm clothing, and responds to such a person by saying “go in peace, keep warm and well fed.”

This term “go in peace” used by James is a terminal response—an end of the encounter is signaled by the person who can help but does not. Today, we might say something like “good luck”—or, far more common in a Christian setting and culture, someone might say to a person who is suffering “I’ll pray for you.”

There is nothing wrong with

Professor Brown explains:

- An expression of *empathy* creates connection, whereas an expression of *sympathy* can often create and produce a lack of connectivity.

- *Empathy* comes from someone who is willing to fully embrace and embody the perception of another person. *Empathy* is climbing down the ladder into the pit.

- *Empathy* resists the desire to determine why another person is in a predicament. *Empathy* resists the seductive temptation of judgment and instead embraces and shares in the suffering.

Climbing down into a pit in which someone has fallen is an accurate description of what actually happened when Jesus was born. The entire new covenant is all about *empathy*, for it is based on the fact that God in the person of Jesus came down, out of eternity, to be WITH us. There was a distance between God and humanity in the old covenant—in fact the distance was prescribed and enforced. But

There is nothing wrong with assuring someone that we will pray for them...but sometimes people say “I’ll pray for you” and then they seldom, if ever, do so.

of the poor soul, but while they may have had *sympathy*, they passed by on the other side of the road, failing to express *empathy*.

I’ll Pray for You

In the book of James, 2:15-16, James notes how empty and trivial it is when someone might

assuring someone that we will pray for them—of course, if we do say we will pray for someone we really should follow up and actually pray for them, shouldn’t we?

But sometimes people say “I’ll pray for you” and then they seldom, if ever do so—they say “I’ll pray for you and you’ll be



in my thoughts” because they feel that’s the right thing to do and say to someone who is suffering.

And sometimes, let’s be honest, saying “I’ll pray for you” enables us to have a way of graciously leaving an uncomfortable situation without further identifying with the suffering and pain. We might say that telling another person we will pray for them is *sympathy*.

There is nothing wrong with *sympathy*, but when Christ lives in us our response to someone near and dear to us who is suffering might begin with *sympathy* but it will not end there.

Sympathy alone doesn’t represent much of an imposition on our time and resources.

Sympathy is normally the first step before *empathy*. We say that we will pray for someone and then we do. And then we go beyond prayer, we identify with the individual—we connect with them—we feel WITH them.

Empathy doesn’t necessarily mean that we do something physical, for in many cases the person who has fallen into the pit lives thousands of miles away from us (or they may live only a few miles away, but we are bedridden ourselves). But this next step of *empathy* can take place even though one is not physically present.

Christ-centered *empathy* means that our momentary pleasures will likely be inconvenienced.

Christ-centered *empathy* means that we will make the difficult choice of shouldering

EMPATHY IS...

- *Empathy* is not someone who has it all together fixing someone who is falling apart.
- *Empathy* is more than words—*empathy* is presence.
- *Empathy* speaks with the eyes and adopts a posture that connects with another.
- *Empathy* is the decision to project into the pain of another rather than merely observing it from a distance.
- *Empathy* is listening with the heart rather than evaluating with the mind.
- *Empathy* is more about being with another in silence than it is about fixing another with words.
- *Empathy* is the conscious choice of sitting with another and embracing their pain with them—*empathy* does not involve discovering reasons for the pain or helping to take it away.
- *Empathy* is **your pain in my heart**.

Those who hunger for empathy care little or not at all about how much someone knows about their dilemma, rather they desire to know how much another cares for them.—Adapted from a similar observation by Theodore Roosevelt

the load of another, bearing their pain WITH them rather than simply assuring them we will pray FOR them, and then returning to our daily activities.

Christ-centered *empathy* means that even while we normally physically leave the scene of suffering, we don’t leave it emotionally.

Christ-centered *empathy* is a choice—a choice to consciously identify WITH suffering and feel the pain of another.

Christmas and Empathy

The celebration of Christmas is, at its heart, a celebration of the birth of God in the flesh, when Jesus came to identify WITH us—to sit WITH us—to be one of us. **Jesus did not come merely to feel FOR us, he came to feel WITH us.**

Empathy is the core of who Jesus was (and is). When God, in the person of Jesus, became

a human, one of his own creation, he identified and embodied who we are.

The celebration of the birth of Jesus is our joy that Jesus did not conveniently only feel FOR us, he felt (and continues to feel) WITH us. He came near—he didn’t watch pain from a distance, but embraced it, he climbed down into our pit, and of course ultimately he accepted all of our pain and suffering on his cross.

The grace of God is a divine gift, like a bridge that enables us to cross over from *sympathy* alone or like a ladder that enables us to climb down, fully embodying and embracing Christ-centered *empathy*.

Empathy describes the actions of God in his incarnation—who, in the person of Jesus, came to sit with us and to be Emmanuel, God WITH us—to intimately experience what it is like to be a human being. □