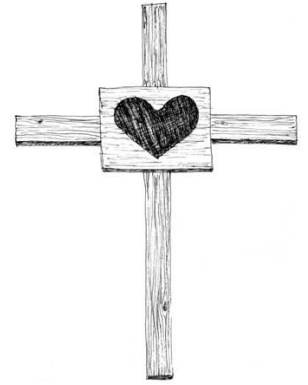


# Listening, Learning, Loving: Empathy as a Practice

Bethany Presbyterian Church • Rev. Lynne Baab, Ph.D.



## 1. Is Empathy valuable?

“Empathy and compassion have become a major focus for international research and appear to be important concepts in human development. . . . Philosophical and psychological interest in empathy was revived in the 1990s with the discovery of mirror neurons.”

— Drigas and Papoutsis, “A New Pyramid Model of Empathy,” *International Journal of Online and Biomedical Engineering*

### *Management*

“Evidencing empathy leads to negotiation success”

—“6 Ways to Improve Empathy in Negotiations,” *Effective Negotiating Skills Consultants*

### *Education*

“Students who are empathetic are more cooperative in class, have better relationships with their teachers, and are more engaged in school. Students with more empathy tend to have higher GPAs and, eventually, greater success in college.” —Greater Good in Education, a Center at U.C. Berkeley

### *Personal coaching*

“Client-perceived coach empathy positively influenced how clients viewed coaching success.”

—Diller, Muhlenberger, Jonas, “The empathy factor: An important aspect of success in every coaching session,” *Consulting Psychology Journal*.

*Note:* empathetic listening is exhausting. Use sparingly. Much listening can be objective, not empathetic.

## 2. What is empathy?

**Compassion** – used 63 times in the Bible  
etymology: Latin, with suffering

**Sympathy** – used 3 times in the Bible  
etymology: Greek, with feeling

**Empathy** – not used in Bible  
etymology: Greek, in feeling

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” (Philippians 2:1-2)

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” (Colossians 3:17)

*Online definition:*  
Empathy is a broad concept that refers to the cognitive and emotional reactions of an individual to the observed experiences of another.

*Communication studies definition:* “Empathy is the cognitive process of **identifying with** or vicariously **experiencing** the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. Scholars recognize that empathy is an important element in understanding and maintaining good interpersonal relationships. When we empathize, we are attempting to **understand** and/or experience what another person understands and/or experiences.”

Verderber and Verderber, *Inter-Act: Interpersonal Communication Concepts, Skills and Contexts*

*Note:* If empathy means feeling the same emotions as another person, then empathy is always partial, never complete.

*Key question:* Do compassion and empathy always include action? Some Christians argue that compassion always involves action in response to the pain of others.

### 3. How do we grow in empathy?

#### *Watch for signals*

- Make an effort to understand your conversation partners.
- Treat your conversation partners as persons with value, not as objects.
- Pay serious attention to what they are saying.
- Pay serious attention to what they feel about what they're saying.
- Be observant and try to "read" non-verbal behavior.
- Ask yourself two questions: "What emotions do I believe the person is experiencing right now?" and "What are the cues the person is giving that I am using to draw this conclusion?"

#### *Read the Gospels and watch for Jesus's empathy*

#### *Practice self-compassion (or self-empathy)*

#### *Use a variety of listening skills.*

### 4. What blocks empathy?

*Our own thoughts* (often called "inner noise"): the to-do list, our discomfort with problems that can't be easily solved, our need to prove we're right

*Our discomfort with silence*

*Our need to fix things*

*Closed body language*, such as crossed arms or leaning back

#### *Things we say*

- Advising: "Here's what I think you should do."
- Reassuring: "I'm sure it will work out okay."
- Arguing logically: "Let's look at the reasons you made that decision."
- Judging: "You really botched that."
- Name calling: "You teachers are all alike."
- Diagnosing: "Your biggest problem is . . ."
- Interrogating: "Why did you do that?"
- Distracting: "Let me tell you about this other thing."
- Minimizing: "At least you have a car."
- Ordering: "Don't do that again next time."
- Warning: "You'll regret it if you do that."
- Moralizing: "You should have been more careful."

*Note:* We need the Holy Spirit's guidance and power to grow in empathy. For a Christian, prayer must be a foundation for empathy because empathy is hard.

*Focus on the listening skill of reflecting.*

Reflecting (also called reflection) involves using a brief sentence to echo something back to the speaker. We might focus on their facial expression or body language: "You're smiling about this!" We might pick something they said to repeat almost verbatim – something very brief. We might summarize or give an insight that comes to us based on what they've said.

Reflecting involves a brief statement, not a question. "You have mixed feelings" is reflecting, while "Do you have mixed feelings?" is a follow-up question.



*Key question:* When empathy feels hard to achieve, should we act like we have it, in the hopes that the action will nurture an inward change?

### Resources

- Five articles Lynne has written about listening skills, including one on the compassion and empathy of Jesus • [lynnebaab.com/articles#cat1](http://lynnebaab.com/articles#cat1)
- Lynne's book on listening • *The Power of Listening: Building Skills for Mission and Ministry*
- YouTube video, "Brené Brown on Empathy" • Great material on empathy. What she calls sympathy, I would call roadblocks to empathy.
- Six books about empathy recommended by psychologists • <https://shorturl.at/hnvC4>
- Seven books about empathy • <https://shorturl.at/kHIJ5>