

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

Even though I didn't imagine being up here recording myself praising God on this Wednesday afternoon, now I couldn't think of a better day. So good morning to you, as you celebrate this youth Sunday, it's youth Wednesday for me but we're going to make it work. We are so glad to have you in worship as you watch from your homes, comfortable on the couch. I know many of us on many a Sunday morning have wished the pews were as comfortable as our couches at home, so here we are making the best of it.

Our group of youth at First Presbyterian tackled a big project for youth Sunday this year. In our first planning meeting for today's service back in November, we all piled onto the futons and comfy couches in the youth room to deliberate, town hall style, what our

theme would be this year. Each time we do this, and this is the seventh time I've witnessed the process, the youth leaders start the brainstorming with a question: this is a day where our group has the floor, and everyone is listening. So what is it that we want to say? We joke every year that there are a million things we wish we could tell all the adults in the congregation, from high school to homework to social media and everything in between in the lives of our youth.

But with the engine and inspiring ideas of our youth leadership team, this year we agreed to take on a challenge, and take a look inward. Our focus last year, if you recall, was transition, and we asked the youth how they perceived the changes happening in our church community. But a year later, our youth leaders came back to the drawing board and decided to ask a new question:

In the midst of the changes we've seen in the past year, and how much our comfort zones have been shaken in the last few months, what hasn't changed? In other words, although we've all been affected by uncertainty recently, what qualities do we find in this group that we can be certain of? what are the things that make our youth our youth, no matter what? After a very involved Sunday evening of youth fellowship and an entire box of Goldfish later, we found our answer. Love, compassion,

kindness, and empathy. Even when the world around us is changing, these four words stay at the center of everything we do in this youth group.

As I was planning the sermon for this service I considered these topics, these four pillars that define us as youth, and one stood out to me: empathy. As Christians, love, kindness, and compassion are words we throw around more often when talking about our job description; they're the basic elements of our identity as followers of God and we try to practice them every day. But empathy is a bit more of an enigma—one that seems to combine the love, kindness, humility, compassion, and patience Jesus reminds us of in Colossians 3.

So what is empathy? In youth fellowship in November, when asked about the things that make our youth our youth, someone volunteered: “we put ourselves in other people’s shoes” and another simply said, “we’re there for each other”. As far as the definition of empathy goes, they hit the nail on the head without even realizing it. As I understand it, to empathize with someone is to understand and feel what another person is experiencing, it is the ability to put yourself in the position of someone else, no matter who they are, and understand their perspective. On

paper, it sounds like something any good Christian should do. So why is it so hard sometimes? Well, in theory, of course it's easier to put ourselves in the shoes of someone who thinks like us, talks like us, looks like us. But it's never that easy, is it? In my personal journey to answer this question, and in developing into an empath myself, I found a way to get past that obstacle—and that's through learning other languages.

I've been studying Spanish since preschool and American Sign Language since I started high school, and the most important thing I've taken away from becoming fluent in both is how much better I'm able to understand people now, people I would have never had the privilege to know otherwise. Over the past year, my face has become familiar among the congregation of Comunidad Presbiteriana de la Trinidad, or CPT. They worship across the courtyard in my great-grandfather Wynn Shaw's chapel. The time I've spent building relationships with the people there has been spent speaking Spanish, and I've found that many of them were more likely to open up to me later on when I was able to share their language with them. I've had the same experience using Sign Language. In practice, to sign is to replace spoken words with expressions using your hands and face. My commitment to learning American Sign Language has taught me

not only how to communicate with the deaf and heard of hearing, but also that the key to love, compassion, kindness, and empathy can be wordless. There's a sign in ASL that looks like (this), and it literally means, "it is with me as it is with you," or, in short, "same here." This sign is used to respond to someone sharing something personal, whether it be an experience they've had, or the way they're feeling. It's a simple, wordless expression of empathy, that doesn't have an exact equivalent in spoken languages. Part of empathy is recognizing emotion in others, and being able to communicate and reciprocate that. Learning other languages and using those skills to understand others has conditioned me to be more empathetic. There's a Czech proverb that says, "As many languages as you know, as many times over you are a human being." I now see the truth in that.

But even if learning other languages makes us more empathetic, that's not a skill we can master overnight—no matter how many hours we're all sitting at home right now with nothing else to do. And even then, the way of love, compassion, kindness, and empathy isn't always the easy way. Every one of you knows that this is one of the many ways God challenges us. Often times, being sympathetic instead of empathic is the path of least resistance. When I was researching this funny thing called

empathy that seems to define us as youth without us even realizing it, I ran into a TED Talk by Dr. Brene Brown. In her explanation of sympathy vs. empathy, and why empathy is so important, she describes this hypothetical situation: you come across someone sitting in a dark hole in the ground. They're clearly distressed, and they shout from the bottom, "hey, I'm stuck, its dark, i'm overwhelmed". A person being sympathetic would stand over the hole and say, "Oh, so it's bad down there, huh? Um.. That totally sucks—but I'll bet you my day was worse. Do you want a sandwich or something?" We can see in this scenario that trying to outmaneuver someones hardship or offering a sandwich are useless when someone is in pain—almost as useless as the priest and the levite in the Good Samaritan story from our first scripture reading today. But an empath, says Dr. Brown, would climb down in there with them, say, "Hey, I know what its like down here, you're not alone" and sit beside them. An empath offers nothing, no sandwich or empty condolences. Empathy is a choice, and its a vulnerable one. To climb down into the dark with someone, and just be there with them. This analogy is emotional for me because I've felt what its like to sit in the dark with someone, as the senior leader of my high school's mental health awareness club and a trained peer

counselor. I volunteer to listen to students stories every day, more than that I seek them out; their experiences with depression, pain, trauma, and feeling completely overwhelmed. It makes my heart heavy to know that the people I pass in the halls every day are carrying such burdens, and it affects me to this day to share that weight with them; to be a teenager who's learning to bear the burden of someone else as if it were her own. I think this is what made one of us say "we're there for each other" on that first day of youth Sunday brainstorming—empathy, humility, and compassion are powerful challenges for Christian youth; its tough, but it makes us who we are. As God's chosen people, we are called to this task day after day. Jesus tells us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. And sometimes those clothes can be heavy. How often do we find ourselves mourning for the brokenness of our world? Each day we hear reports of violence, sickness, and addiction, of corruption, and threats both visible and invisible. It is enough to make one sick at heart. As children of God, our hearts ache as His does for unity, peace, and fullness of life, by which we are surrounded today in this virtual worship.

In fact, I am reminded often as a longtime member of this youth group, empathy doesn't always mean feeling the burdens

of someone else, or sitting in the dark with someone who is in pain. An empath also walks alongside someone in their happiest moments. The first thing we do on Sunday evenings when we gather as youth is share a highlight from our week with one another. We celebrate the highlights of each youth together and there is such joy in that. This is why I believe empathy is God's greatest challenge for us: we walk alongside those who are experiencing great joy, but our hearts break alongside those who are hurting—and we do it regardless of who that might be. Love, compassion, kindness, empathy. These things know no prejudice, no exceptions or expectations. Empathy doesn't exist in a vacuum, or in a single moment—you can't decide you've had enough and leave it behind. It's ongoing; we have to carry it with us and clothe ourselves in it every day. And sometimes, it's not the easy choice. If it were easy, I would be up here talking about something else. That is why God calls us to empathy- not the kind of response that shrugs offers an unsolicited sandwich, or passes by on the other side of the road. We are called to love, kindness, compassion, and empathy, that stirs us to deeds of mercy and justice, that leads us to climb down into that dark hole with someone, or be the good samaritan that stops at the side of the road. Now, I've never been to seminary, but I do know this

fairly well: love your neighbor as yourself. Put yourself in someone else's shoes. Be there for one another. And clothe yourselves in love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. As Jesus tells us, go and do likewise. Amen.