

Welcome

One of the most cringeworthy places on the internet is a subreddit called RoastMe. Reddit, for those who don't know, is a discussion website where users can post links, pictures or topics and other users vote them up or down. Threads, called 'subreddits' are organized by topics. On the RoastMe subreddit, users post their pictures and the redditors rip them apart savagely - RoastMe is one of the cruelest places on the internet.

[Picture 1] At the beginning of February, a Russian teen posted his picture to the RoastMe subreddit. He titled his post "17 year old russian with crippling depression. Give me a reason to end it all."

Instead of roasting him, the thread responded with a tremendous outpouring of love. [Read [comments from thread](#)] The vast majority of the over 6,000 comments were in this vein.

[Picture 2] And it worked... three days later, the boy posted another picture, this time with the caption "Thank you for all the support! Seeing complete strangers care about my situation really warmed my heart."

The story went viral in part because it's a reminder that, as toxic a place as the internet often is, it can be a place of beauty and community as well.

And that's the tension we're going to explore together today. What is the difference between toxicity and community? The surprise is that it comes down to a choice we have when we face awkward encounters.

Today is about the virtue of kindness, the opportunity we all have every day to choose to embody God to the world.

Message

We're in the season of Lent, a season the Church reserves for self-examination and repentance. Lent is a time we confess we are sinners and ask for God's help to heal us. But Lent presses us deeper than that because Lent invites us to ask God, along with the Psalmist, to search us and point out anything in us that is displeasing to God.

In other words, during Lent, we assume there are sins in our life we're not even aware of. That's one big reason we need God's help - to point out what is otherwise hidden from us.

In that spirit, our series this year is called CRINGEWORTHY: A Theory of Awkwardness. According to journalist Melissa Dahl, we feel awkward when we see ourselves through someone else's eyes and we realize that the way they see us and the way we see ourselves don't line up.

We spent the first couple of weeks exploring how awkwardness can be a spiritual tool. We saw that, like the first man and woman, our natural tendency is to hide when we're confronted with that gap between

how we see ourselves and how God sees us. But - as we saw last week with Judah and Tamar - if we're willing to stay in the awkwardness, we find our growing edge. We can begin to overcome that sin that was hidden but now exposed.

Today, we're going to talk about the other kind of awkwardness we feel - not when WE do something awkward, but what happens when we feel awkward on behalf of someone else. This is the awkwardness we feel when we're watching TV like *The Office* or *Arrested Development*. Or when we see someone else trip while walking. It's why America's Funniest Home Videos was such a popular TV show (until YouTube killed it, and now we just share blunders on social media).

We cringe when others make it awkward because of what psychologists call *empathy*. Empathy is the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. And generally, we think of empathy as a good thing. Brene Brown has built a career on helping us all work to understand each other better. I wrote a whole book encouraging empathy as a spiritual practice.

But Dahl suggests that empathy is not *automatically* good. Think back to those fail videos. We see a kid accidentally knock their dad in a swimming pool and we laugh because we feel for the parent - parents suffer so much their kids are unaware of. But that same empathetic understanding lies behind why we watch videos of political commentators getting put in their place. We love to see people who disagree with us publicly humiliated.

But we can only feel that because we are expressing empathy - we know what it feels like to be called out when we don't know what we're talking about.

One group of people who scores really high in empathy is, surprisingly, internet trolls. But it makes sense - in order to troll someone - to comment in such a way the person is insulted or hurt, you have to understand them.

How do we make sense of this? Some psychologists split the concept of empathy into 2 kinds - cognitive empathy and compassionate empathy. With cognitive empathy, we can understand what the other person is thinking and feeling, but we keep them at arm's length. This lets us manipulate or laugh at them. Compassionate empathy, on the other hand, is when we let ourselves identify with the other person, to really feel what they're feeling. To stand in solidarity with them.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Samuel 10. I want to explore a famously awkward Bible story that illustrates both kinds of empathy, and demonstrates how dangerous it is for us as God's people to be empathetic but not compassionate.

This is a story from the rule of King David. The chapter opens by telling us that it happens during the time of year kings are usually at war. Instead of going out with his armies, David remained at his palace - a sure sign something is already wrong.

Because he's not where he's supposed to be, David ends up creeping on a woman named Bathsheba, who's married to one of his officers (who is away fighting). David makes Bathsheba come to his palace, and he sexually assaults her and when she tells David she's pregnant, he freaks out. If word gets out, this will be very awkward for him - the king staying home, assaulting his officers' wives while they're out fighting his battles. We're going to pick up in verse 6 to see how David handles the situation. Pay attention to the fact that he demonstrates a great deal of *cognitive empathy*.

Then David sent word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." So Joab sent him to David. When Uriah arrived, David asked him how Joab and the army were getting along and how the war was progressing. Then he told Uriah, "Go on home and relax." David even sent a gift to Uriah after he had left the palace. But Uriah didn't go home. He slept that night at the palace entrance with the king's palace guard.

When David heard that Uriah had not gone home, he summoned him and asked, "What's the matter? Why didn't you go home last night after being away for so long?"

Uriah replied, "The Ark and the armies of Israel and Judah are living in tents, and Joab and my master's men are camping in the open fields. How could I go home to wine and dine and sleep with my wife? I swear that I would never do such a thing."

"Well, stay here today," David told him, "and tomorrow you may return to the army." So Uriah stayed in Jerusalem that day and the next. Then David invited him to dinner and got him drunk. But even then he couldn't get Uriah to go home to his wife. Again he slept at the palace entrance with the king's palace guard. -- 2 Samuel 11:6-13

David is doing everything he can think of to weasel his way out of getting caught, and he's demonstrating a massive amount of cognitive empathy for Uriah - it's what enables him to manipulate him. David understands what it's like to be away from your wife, from the comforts of home.

What he didn't count on was Uriah's character. Unlike David, Uriah is thinking of his troops. So he refuses to go along with David's ploy and even shames David by implying David should be out with the troops too.

Because David can't get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba - thus covering up his sin, he has Uriah killed. Then David makes Bathsheba marry him and she bears a son.

Now, David is the king, so if you're wondering whether he got away with it, he did. It's nearly impossible that all this happened without anyone's knowledge - David communicated with Bathsheba and Uriah through messengers, and summoning a specific soldier back from the battlefield had to raise some red flags (especially when that soldier comes back with a letter instructing his commander to have him killed).

But David is king. So no one said anything. After all... he had Uriah killed. What's he going to do to a whistleblower?

You might also be wondering how God felt about all this. The author tells us: **The LORD was displeased with what David had done. -- 2 Samuel 11:27**

Um. Yeah.

God's solution is to send David's court prophet, Nathan in. One of the prophet's main jobs has always been to speak truth to power. They functioned as a sort of independent check on the king. But again, David's already been shirking his duties, assaulting another man's wife, doing backflips to try to cover it up and ultimately committing murder. It's not like he didn't know what he was doing. But somehow he didn't see what he was doing as wrong. There was a *big* gap between how David saw himself and how God saw David. It was Nathan's job to expose that gap. Nathan had to make it awkward. And he did it with a story.

The LORD sent Nathan the prophet to tell David this story: "There were two men in a certain town. One was rich, and one was poor. The rich man owned a great many sheep and cattle. The poor man owned nothing but one little lamb he had bought. He raised that little lamb, and it grew up with his children. It ate from the man's own plate and drank from his cup. He cuddled it in his arms like a baby daughter. One day a guest arrived at the home of the rich man. But instead of killing an animal from his own flock or herd, he took the poor man's lamb and killed it and prepared it for his guest."

David was furious. "As surely as the LORD lives," he vowed, "any man who would do such a thing deserves to die! He must repay four lambs to the poor man for the one he stole and for having no pity."

Nathan appeals to David's compassionate empathy with a story. He disguised David's actions as those of another man. David quickly (and rightly) condemned that man.

And now that David's compassionate empathy has been engaged, Nathan springs his trap:

Then Nathan said to David, "You are that man!" -- 2 Samuel 12:1-7

Nathan forces David into the awkwardness gap. He makes David see his actions toward Bathsheba and Uriah with compassion, not just cognition. He makes the king *feel* the consequences of his sin.

David is broken. He repents, but there's no unringing the bell. Bathsheba has been assaulted, violated. Uriah is dead.

Friends this is the real danger of empathy without compassion. Cognitive empathy alone results in contempt. And contempt poisons our souls. Counselors tell us the single best indicator of a couple headed for a split isn't anger or embarrassment - those are both signs the people are still committed to

making it work. It's contempt - the rolling of the eyes or the silent treatment, refusing to engage. Contempt is what we too often feel for people who are across the political spectrum from us. Or of a different culture, religion, class or race.

Contempt is poison. It's sin. Contempt cuts us off from the Other. We become like David, able to justify nearly anything because they don't really count as human. We look down on them.

The antidote to contempt is the spiritual fruit of kindness. Kindness is a choice to practice compassionate empathy, to feel what they feel, not just understand them.

One of the more awkward stand-up comedians working is Sarah Silverman. She's lewd and crude, and her stand-up routines are the very definition of NSFW. So it was a pleasant surprise when she took down a twitter troll with kindness.

In response to one of her tweets, a guy named Jeremy called Silverman a very bad name. She responded with, "I believe in you. I read ur timeline & I see what ur doing & your rage is thinly veiled pain. But u know that. I know this feeling. Ps My back... sux too. See what happens when us choose love. I see it in you."

In response to Jeremy's tweet, Silverman didn't just respond in anger. She didn't sic her more than 12 million followers on him. She went to his timeline and learned about him. She saw he suffered from chronic back pain, that he didn't have money to diagnose, let alone treat his condition. Then she responded with compassionate empathy. She let him know she not only understood him, but stood in solidarity with his pain.

Silverman tweeted back and forth with Jeremy, convinced him to go to a support group and eventually donated to his GoFundMe, then encouraged her followers to do the same. Jeremy ended up with more than enough money to cover his bills and ended up donating the extra funds to charities in his hometown - San Antonio, TX.

Dahl writes in *Cringeworthy*, "All of us are afraid, to varying degrees, of social rejection or ostracism, and when we sense that fear in others, we can choose to respond with contempt or compassion. Both are ways of processing that automatic empathy response... You feel the ostracism right along with the ostracized, and you can either bring that person in or push them out."

God calls us to kindness, to the embrace of that awkward other. Kindness is a virtue, which means it's a quality God has that we can receive from God (there's a reason Paul calls it one of the Spirit's fruit - it's what happens in our lives when the Spirit transforms us.

What would happen if the next time you get crossways with someone else - a co-worker, a neighbor, your spouse or your kid, you took time not just to try to understand them, but to FEEL what they feel? How would that change the conflict?

Examen + Communion

[Communion Slide] Jesus' kindness towards us is what makes us part of his family.

1. When have I practiced kindness in the last week?
2. Who have I looked at with contempt in the past week?
3. Who might I be tempted to look down on this week?
4. How can I choose to practice kindness in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing

Practice kindness this week.

Our world is hungry for kindness, but it's always a risk to put ourselves out there. It's awkward to be the one to make the first move, to respond to a troll with compassion. Risk it knowing that God is with you!