

HAPPIER AHEAD

Navigating Terrains of Life

Week Three

The Power of Empathy | John 11:1-45; Hebrews 4:14-16

Empathy means recognising emotion in other people – feeling “with” them – not just intellectually but in a deeply felt, experiential way. It’s a vulnerable choice, since to connect with another person we must first connect with that emotion in ourselves. This sort of vulnerable decision is vital to experience any sort of happiness on earth, however, because what makes something better (even the most horrible of things) is connection. Empathy fuels connection. It is knowing we are not alone in our struggle.

Empathy is a way to connect to the emotion another person is experiencing, but it does not require that we experience the same situation they are going through. Of course, a great example of this is found in Jesus. Jesus felt for the blind, the lame and all sinners. Though He was not blind, lame or a sinner Himself.

Still, though there is a beauty to empathy, it can also be misused. We can distort empathy, like when we fail to create any emotional boundaries between ourselves and others until it ends up overwhelming us. Or when we use empathy to mistakenly coddle sin, making excuses for sin because of how we feel, instead of truthfully taking our struggles to God with a heart of repentance.

Empathy, when rightly understood and practised, is a profound gift that enables us to forge deep, meaningful connections with others. It is through such connections that we begin to alleviate the sense of isolation that plagues the human experience.

Opening Questions

- 1 / When a friend shares his/her struggles with you, what is your usual response? Do you usually take up the role of: a comforter, an advisor, a listener, an encourager, etc.?
- 2 / When you share your struggles with others, what kind of responses do you usually get? What kind of responses do you actually want? (E.g. acknowledgement, intellectual discussions, prayer, accompaniment, etc.?)

Bible Study & Questions

Read John 11:1-45 and Hebrews 4:14-16, and discuss the following questions:

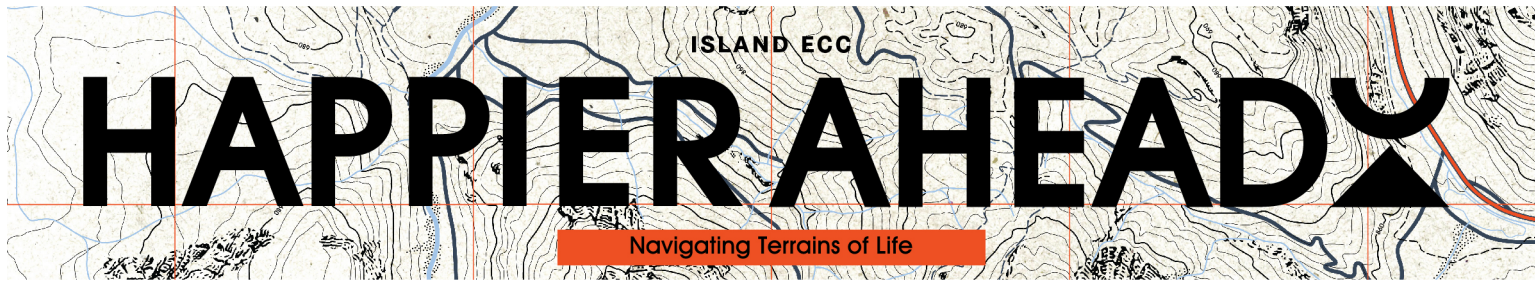
1 / How did Jesus react to Lazarus’ sickness initially (John 11:4-6, 14-15)? Why did Jesus do and say such things?

Note: Jesus delayed His visit for two days (John 11:6), and was “glad” that He was not there (John 11:15). There is a greater picture beyond what was seen (John 11:4, 25-26, 40-42).

2 / What was Jesus’ emotion in John 11:33-36? Why did Jesus weep? What made Jesus able to relate to others (Hebrews 4:15-16)?

3 / Try to rephrase John 11:25-27 in your own language – what kind of “life” and “death” was Jesus referring to? Why is Jesus able to accomplish this (Hebrews 4:14)?

Note: Try to articulate “what is salvation”, “how are we saved” and “who is Jesus”.



4 / Knowing that:

- your present suffering is understood by Jesus (John 11:33-35; Hebrews 4:15); and
- your future salvation is secured in Jesus (John 11:25-27; Hebrews 4:14),

How does this help you with (a) processing your own emotions and (b) empathising with others' emotions? (Hebrews 4:16)

Note: Having eternal hope in Christ does not mean we are freed from all suffering now, but Jesus understands our suffering and emotions – we can take comfort in this, and we can model after Jesus as we seek to empathise and comfort others.

5/ What's one action that you can take today to cultivate empathy for others in your communities?

Prayer Activity

Active listening and prayer are important for cultivating empathy for others. We can seek help from tools like “emotions wheel”, and more importantly, we seek help from the Holy Spirit through prayer as we learn to empathise and care for others.

- **Group Idea:** Have everyone in the group prayerfully re-read John 11:1-45. Instruct everyone to put themselves in the shoes of the various people in the passage and imagine the feelings that they felt. Then, take time to meditate on those identified feelings. Have them contemplate the following questions: i) do you feel this way right now? ii) have you ever felt this way? iii) what was the cause of it and how can you submit it before God?

Helpful Tips

- Search for an “emotions wheel” online. Invite your friend to identify his/her current emotions from the “emotions wheel”. If he/she feels comfortable, invite him/her to share what causes those emotions. Practise active listening and ask appropriate follow-up questions as he/she shares.
- Pray for your own understanding and empathy for your friend's emotions.
- Pray for your friend based on his/her emotions and causes shared.