

Empathy Sun, September 27, 2020

This morning I am going to talk about empathy. I am going to suggest that Jesus is the ultimate empathizer. Our epistle from Philippians, is an early Christian hymn. It is about the empathy of Christ and begins like this:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6who, though he was in the form of God, ... emptied himself, being born in human likeness,...8he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

But first a little story.

British statesman and financier Cecil Rhodes, whose fortune was used to endow the world-famous Rhodes Scholarships, was a stickler for correct dress--but apparently not at the expense of someone else's feelings. A young man invited to dine with Rhodes arrived by train and had to go directly to Rhodes's home in his travel-stained clothes. Once there he was appalled to find the other guests already assembled, wearing full evening dress. After what seemed a long time Rhodes appeared, in a shabby old blue suit. Later the young man learned that his host had been dressed in evening clothes, but put on the old suit when he heard of his young guest's dilemma.

Empathy...Cecil Rhodes empathized with his guest. He felt his guest's embarrassment so strongly that he acted to ease his discomfort. He joined with his guest by dressing down, despite being a stickler for correct dress. In doing so, he humbled himself, placing the well-being of his guest before his own. In the same way you could say that our Lord 'dressed down' for us.

Empathy is important. We hear talk of 'emptying' ourselves in pastoral care circles. But what is 'empathy' and what is 'emptying ourselves'?

The Rev Dr Ann Jervis, who was a professor of mine at Wycliffe College in Toronto, has written an article on 'Empathy in the New Testament'. She claims that empathy is central in Christianity. It is a characteristic of God, of Christ and of ourselves as we become more Christ-like.

She defines empathy as “...understanding the experience of the other.” It is the ability to enter into another’s story, especially connecting with the emotions of the other.

Empathy involves sympathetic listening, which is not critical or suspicious. It is the opposite of the critical listening a jury does when hearing witnesses. Empathy means believing the story of the other.

Empathy means participating in the other’s story. The listener actually feels the experience of the other at some level. To have empathy with another is to feel the emotions with that person. An extreme example of empathy is the father-to-be who has pain during his partner’s labour.

Having empathy requires putting our own concerns and preoccupations aside. This is what is meant by emptying ourselves. Emptied, one can enter the world of the other and walk alongside the other. Those of us who have received such empathy, such companionship from another, know how powerful, healing and validating it is. I hope we are all treated with empathy when we most need it. I remember distinctly my Aunt Esther sitting on the edge of my bed after my father died. I was 13 years old. I don’t remember what she said. I do remember the feeling of being loved. She had a soothing voice and she rubbed my back a bit so I could relax...She recognized a young girl’s loss and she paused to be with me and I have never forgotten it.

Some early childhood specialists suggest that it is very important that young children’s feelings be acknowledged and accepted. They need to have parents who can empathize with their feelings.

In sending Jesus, God demonstrates radical empathy with us. God not only recognizes our troubles but enters into our experience in the person of Jesus. Humans did not understand how deeply God feels for us until God sent Jesus. Jesus is living proof that God actively empathizes with human existence.

Being both human and divine, Jesus completely understands both God and humans. This makes Jesus the ultimate empathizer. Jesus’ active empathy is that he fully enters the experience of humanity. As Philippians says

“Christ...did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself,...being born in the likeness of humanity.”

He feels the human struggles with sin, disease and death. He is moved to compassion as he embarks on a ministry of healing and teaching. But there is a cost to empathy when it becomes active. Jesus’ identification with humanity led him to a confrontation with the final enemy, the enemy called death. He was not spared the fear and pain of a horrible death. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus expresses the human wish to avoid death. The agony of Jesus’ dying is the ultimate expression of Jesus’ empathy. As the hymn in Philippians says, “being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:7-8)

So is empathy important for followers of Jesus, the ultimate empathizer? Philippians says “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” We are invited to have the same mind as Christ. To have the same mind as Christ means to identify strongly with our Lord while also empathizing strongly with others. It means identifying both with Christ and with others. It means entering the experience of living with the same empathy as Christ himself had for both God and humans.

Ann Jervis whom I mentioned earlier says that “Paul considers ...the goal for believers is to participate fully in Christ. This means hoping for a resurrection like his, dying with him, and living with the kind of faith with which he lived. Paul considers his own identification with Jesus Christ to be so complete that he can write in Galatians:

“it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20)

The challenge held before followers of Christ is to be Christ’s instrument.

For Paul, the empathetic response of the believer, the active empathy of the believer, is the key to the Christian life.

Ireneaus, a very early Christian church father does not use the word empathy when he talks about Jesus, but his famous statement suggests it: “Jesus became as we are in order that we might become as he is.”

How are we to become more ‘as he is’, more Christ-like?

How are we to live with this 2-fold empathy toward our Lord and toward

others?

There's no pat formula.

Some have identified so strongly with Jesus' suffering that they have 'stigmata', which is bleeding from hands and feet. St. Francis of Assisi regularly had the 'stigmata'. We will not expect to have that, but we can, with God's help grow more in identifying with others. Being curious and interested can help very much in entering into others' worlds. Finding out more information about others can help us to enter their stories.

Once, a long while ago, a young woman, a friend at the time, told me something I've never forgotten. She said that if there was someone in our small community with whom she felt a tension, rather than avoid the person, she would talk with that person, not necessarily about the trouble, but just about anything. She found connecting in that way often dispelled the awkwardness. Talking to the person helped her enter into that person's world and to empathize, to see their point of view. This brought them closer.

There is an important saying among Native Americans:

"Don't judge me until you walk in my moccasins for three moons."

"Jesus became as we are in order that we might become as he is."

We need not be anxious about our transformation. For we are reminded in Philippians that... "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Let us trust that, Christ became as we are in order that we might become as he is...and that God is indeed at work in each of us.