

Title: The Roots Are Deep

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Texts: Deuteronomy 6.1-9 Matthew 22.34-40

Series: What Happened to Empathy?!

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For the past several years, but particularly in recent months, there has been a flood of church-related articles and books on the topic of empathy.....and, in particular, the perceived loss of empathy from disciples of Jesus for one another, and for all others.

This explosion of thought and written words suggests that many within the community of Jesus' followers believe that something is seriously wrong inside the practice of Christian faith..... that something is wrong with the church's understanding of who Jesus is, and how we are to follow him..... that something is so broken about our understanding and practice of the belief that God is love..... that the collective Church, and we individual disciples, are at risk of making our faith in Jesus irrelevant..... or, even worse, we run the risk of turning faith in the saving grace of Jesus into a weapon that divides and condemns and destroys!

As we talk about empathy today, and in coming weeks, I want to offer the definition of "Empathy" that I am currently working with. It may evolve, but this is where I am today:

'Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.'

To practice empathy, to be empathetic, is to understand and be moved by the joy or hurt or hope or pain of another.....it is the ability to place ourselves in the emotional shoes of another, and so have a sense of where a person is coming from, and what they may be feeling.

And, more than just the ability to feel emotions, I believe empathy involves action on behalf of another individual or a whole group of people...action designed to make their life or lives more livable, more meaningful simply because they are a fellow human being, fellow children of God.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew, which has its theological roots in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, where Moses tells the people of Israel that following the Ten Commandments is pointless unless one first loves God with every fiber of their being. Our Gospel lesson in Matthew is where Jesus forever defines the practice of empathy as the primary work of his disciples.

We are to love God, and to practice and demonstrate this love, by loving and caring for our neighbors just as much as we love ourselves. Jesus isn't just making a polite suggestion to his followers here. Jesus is telling us

that our embrace of empathetic love is the only way we can follow him.

The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the church at Corinth offers a wonderful description of active, empathetic love. He says empathetic love is patient, empathetic love is kind, empathetic love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Empathetic love does not insist on its own way. Empathetic love is not irritable or resentful. Empathetic love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Empathetic love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Empathetic love never ends!

In calling us to live with empathy toward all others, Jesus demands that we approach one another and interact with all others, guided by a very different set of priorities than those generally embraced by society around us, and taught to us –formally or informally – through most of our interactions with others.

Earlier I mentioned all the attention and energy that Christian scholars and writers are presently giving to the perceived lack of empathy within the contemporary church. Certainly this loss of empathy is not just contained to the disciples of Jesus. Culturally, as a whole, we seem to care less about the feelings and emotional well-being of others. Embracing instead a myopic belief that “what I need, and what I’m feeling” is the only thing that matters, and trumps the needs and feelings of all others.

I believe this dynamic is most visibly led by many of our politicians. And, yet, politicians racing each other to the bottom of human behavior to garner votes, is nothing new and does not fully explain the cultural disappearance of empathy. Disturbingly, research shows that perhaps the most significant loss of empathy within America society has taken place among white Protestant disciples of Jesus. Scholars document this empathy-gap as being more pronounced among white evangelical Christians. But we who occupy a more-progressive Christian space should not feel too comfortable here, should not feel that we are off the empathy hook. For white main-line protestants –meaning most of us – are culpable as well when it comes to diminished empathy.

We may not be as openly critical and damning of others as are our more evangelical sisters and brothers in faith when it comes to those perceived to be different. But our lack of diversity –economic and racial – and our polite reluctance to vigorously engage in the significant contemporary conversations about who is given value and place in our society, and who is not. Like migrants, and women, and those who do not match easily understood gender identifications, and all whose skin color is not pale. We also have empathy work to do in our faith community, and in our lives as disciples.

John Pavlovitz is one of those writing about the church’s empathy gap. He is a former evangelical pastor who became so uncomfortable with the lack of compassion and grace he witnessed around him in his church, that he eventually gave up being a pastor. In his recent book, entitled, “If God Is Love, Don’t Be A Jerk”, Pavlovitz reminds disciples that empathy can be recovered as a practice of our faith by looking to Jesus.

He says: “Jesus talked of the last being first, of becoming servant of all, of laying down one’s life for one’s friends. Jesus affirmed the priceless values of denying oneself, of healing the hurting, of caring for the poor, of elevating the marginalized, of freeing the oppressed, of seeing the overlooked; of being peacemakers, foot washers, cheek turners, mercy givers. Jesus wasn’t in the business of nation building, but community making, not about consolidating wealth but spreading it around and making sure no one went without. Jesus’ life as witnessed in the Gospel stories is a beautifully subversive manifesto of smallness and kindness and goodness, continually reiterating the sacredness of sacrifice, the dignity of humility, the redemptive nature of forgiveness.” (p. 69). It seems to me that too many of us present day disciples, see the love which Jesus encourages us to share without limits...that too many of us see this love as limited, as a scarce resource where there isn’t enough for all and so, we must hoard love instead of sharing it.

Pavlovitz says, “We assume that love for one must come at the expense of another; we reflect a fearful religion that suggests we are perpetually in danger; and we reveal a faith rooted in superiority and self-preservation, one that breeds hostility to those it sees as outsiders.....” (p.74) (

Oh, this is a lot to think about! And yet, I believe our practice of empathy –our individual and collective practice of empathy – is the most important thing we can do, and way we can live as disciples. Embracing and living the empathy modeled for us by Jesus is where we know hope. Hope that all of us, and all people everywhere, can grow beyond present divisions, and present discrimination, and present injustice, can grow beyond our narrow and selfish selves into the love for God and love for neighbor that Jesus demands of us.

By now most of you know that I like to assign us some spiritual homework each week...something that we can do to work on our faith formation; to practice the faith we proclaim. So, for our spiritual homework this week, I invite us to look at all those places in our lives where we perceive or feel scarcity –particularly where we believe love is limited. In exploring these feelings of scarcity, let us lay our feelings alongside the example of Jesus, and see what he might have to teach us, and feel where he is pushing us to live and act and love differently. I hope it is a challenging and exhilarating week for all of us!

To God be the glory!! Amen!!!

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John Pavlovitz – *If God Is Love, Don’t Be A Jerk: Finding Faith
That Makes Us Better Humans*