

Title: For All or For Just Some
Date: 11/14/2021
Texts: Isaiah 58.6-9 Matthew 25.34-46
Series: What Happened to Empathy?!
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Matthew 25.34-46

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'"

The 'least of these' is a category that mostly makes us uncomfortable. The 'least of these' is not a place where the majority of us believe we will ever see our own reflection. The 'least of these' may be folks whom we think deserve our pity, and possible need our care.....But they are, to our minds, somehow different from us; really, less than us if we are honest with our feelings here. And because of such beliefs and attitudes on our part, an important question for us to ponder and answer concerns how we have come to our belief about the 'least of these'.

How do we know that we are not the 'least of these'? How do we know that our identity –who we are, and what we believe, and what we look like, and the resources available to us.....How do we know that these characteristics make us different than the 'least of these', maybe even make us the baseline for normalcy? That our characteristics are what everyone else aspires to be; are what everyone else is working hard to be? That who we are is what God uses as the standard measure for all others? How do we know this?

I don't think we do know; don't think we can know what is considered normal, and what qualities God may or may not use -outside of the person of Jesus – to delineate between we human beings. I don't think we should assume that God has granted us a special place in the order of things; or that for God we are somehow more than the 'least of these'.

In an often repeated story over the course of time, when a group of people sees themselves as special, as unique, as deserving of a place in the center of God's heart, and in the center of God's priorities, and the inhabitants of God's beloved community.....Folks such as these, perhaps folks such as us, will do almost anything to stay in power, to feel in charge, to hang onto the status quo. There is a lot of anxiety in trying to hang on to control and power –regardless of whether such control and such power is real or perceived.

For those who see themselves as better than the 'least of these'; those who are certain that their thinking and their actions are normal and right.....Such folks will generally do just about anything to retain the power and influence over others and over the systems of control they believe they have.....But this control-driven anxiety plays out in all sorts of broken and dysfunctional ways, as those desiring to maintain authority they believe belongs exclusively to them

must try harder and harder to maintain control, or the illusion of control.....And the fight to maintain a position of power and authority comes with horrible costs, ever-increasing costs.

By and large, Christian Churches in America –all across the theological spectrum – have been in a state of decline for the last 50-60 years or so. Sure, there are individual congregations that have and continue to buck this trend..... But recent American church history has been marked by a decline in participation and popularity, and control, and wealth, and power. The reasons for this shift from what once was are varied and hotly debated. If we had weeks of time available to us for intensive study and prayer, we might begin to gain some understanding of the forces driving this shift, but we do not have such time.....It is the effects of this ongoing shift that I believe are easier for us to grasp.

And here I'm wanting us to continue to explore the loss of empathy among American Christians, and particularly among white, protestant Christians like ourselves. I'm not trying to make us feel bad about ourselves with this focus.....Guilt never helps foster deeper understanding. Instead, I want us to see that shifts in how we understand and care for each other, and exercise compassion for those in the world around us.....That such loss of empathy has a detrimental impact on who we are as a faith institution, and who we are as individual disciples of Jesus! And I believe that by reclaiming a more complete, more wholistic practice of empathy, we have the opportunity to be more the people that God desires us to be--that God has created us to be. And while embracing deeper empathy may reverse church decline, the only reason for a more intentional practice of empathy is the possible growth in our individual and collective faithfulness.

Sadly, examples of fading empathy are all around us, and have been front and center before us this week. Fading empathy is present when we Christians become selective about who receives God's care and good gifts; about who is in charge, and who is not; about who is the 'least of these. And fading empathy is present, when a white lawyer can stand in a court of law and declare that black pastors should not be allowed to sit in the courtroom. And fading empathy is present, when a 17 year-old is empowered without authority to carry an assault rifle on the streets of an American city and believes he is entitled to shoot at those chasing him for gunning down those protesting for racial justice and equality. And fading empathy is present when school board meetings, and airplanes in flight, and grocery stores become places to yell and scream at each other, and bully and attempt to intimidate those with differing opinions. And fading empathy is present when our common good, our common public health, becomes less important than individual desire and intentional ignorance.

In contrast to fading empathy, however, Jesus is very clear in our Matthew lesson, and throughout the Gospels, Jesus is clear to the point of bluntness, that God's gifts are for all, and particularly for those who are 'the least of these', and the 'last of these', and the 'lost of these'. Jesus is clear that his disciples are to go out of their way, any time and all the time there is human need and offer love and care and compassion and kindness. Jesus is clear that we his disciples are not to worry about gaining power or practicing authority, that we are not to worry about being better than others, about trying to differentiate ourselves from those we consider to be the 'least of these'. Jesus is clear that we are to serve others everywhere we can, and every opportunity we can, without qualification, without exception; we serve where there is need, and we keep serving until the need is met.

Again, I know that this conversation about empathy is heavy and difficult, and, at least for me, it is uncomfortable too. But I believe that building our individual and corporate capacity for empathy is the most faithful, most important thing we can be about as disciples of Jesus right now. As Jesus makes clear in our Gospel lesson, without empathy the world crumbles!

For our spiritual homework this week, let us all keep searching for opportunities to practice empathy –big opportunities- -little opportunities, it doesn't make any difference. Let us up our practice of empathy, that God may use us to make a holy difference and change the world. Amen!!!

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