
The Language of Empathy

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**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21 - Year B**

When I was fifteen, I lived in a small town in South Carolina. I wore heeled leather boots that zipped up the side, plaid double knit pants that flared at the bottom, muscle shirts that were skin-tight, and long hair that came down to my shoulders.

Yes, I was cool!

Then, at the beginning of my sophomore year, I went to Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia. Life was different there. By Christmas, my look was different too.

I looked like an advertisement for JoS A. Bank.

My ears were showing, and I had a new dress uniform-dirty bucks, khaki pants, a white oxford button-down shirt, a crimson red and navy blue club striped tie, and a blue blazer.

I wore essentially the same thing every day, occasionally substituting corduroy pants or a herringbone pattern wool blazer. I never even untied the tie. When I arrived home in June, the tie still carried syrup stains from breakfasts in January!

These changes carried symbolic meaning, of course. Part of it was purely profane. I wanted to fit in, to look like the other guys, to be part of the group. And, I did. We all looked pretty much the same.

Part of it was just growing up. I was learning not to compulsively reject all authority. I was learning the difference between being for something and just being against everything else.

But, part of it had a more sacred character. On the athletic field, in the classroom, in the dining hall, and in the dormitory, I was learning what it means to be in community. I was learning what it means to live with other people, to belong to them, and to be for them. I was learning what it means to be a "we."

The Gospel of Mark talks a lot about community. Jesus calls his disciples to create a new community that anticipates the coming of the Kingdom. And, despite their getting more things wrong than right, the story ends with a promise of just such a new community in Galilee. "Don't be afraid," the young man in the empty tomb tells the women who have come to anoint Jesus. "Go to Galilee and you will see him there." (Mk 16:7)

If you listen to how Mark talks about community, you will hear a language of empathy. It sounds a lot like Paul's description of the church as the Body of Christ-hands, feet, and eyes all contributing their gifts to the building up of the body. But, the language of the body is empathy. The body works because of its ability to recognize and release the gifts of each of its constituent parts.

Paul uses the language of empathy in describing his approach to evangelism in his first letter to the Corinthians. He describes himself as becoming like each of the different constituencies he has evangelized in order to engage them. "I have become all things to all people," he says, "that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." (1 Cor. 9:22, 23)

Jesus uses the language of empathy to respond to John's complaints about an unlicensed exorcist. "Do not stop him," Jesus says, "whoever is not against us is for us." And this goes for anyone who so much as gives the disciples a cup of water.

In other words, it's not about getting credit. It's about building up the body. It's about bringing in the Kingdom.

The language of empathy begins a new conversation. To anticipate the Kingdom is to create a community of character that is inclusive by nature. It's not a community that is trying to be diverse for the sake of diversity. It's a community that just loves people.

It's not a community that asks "can we let this person in?"

It's a community that asks "is there any reason that justifies keeping this person out?"

This is all it takes to start a new conversation. All of these unlicensed exorcists make each of us even more aware of how much we didn't know, of all the things that we didn't see. As we learn to speak the language of empathy, we begin to realize that our understanding of the truth is not the only legitimate understanding, and that the way we have always done things is not the only effective way to do them.

When we aren't all white any more, those of us who are begin to realize that we have racist tendencies-not because we are personally hostile to people of color, but because we have been taught to make intuitive judgments about what color means.

When we aren't all male any more, those of us who are begin to realize that we have been making decisions about gender based on patriarchal assumptions that we didn't even know we had.

When we aren't all heterosexual any more, those of us who are begin to realize that what we thought of as sexual is in reality only one way of being sexual.

And, to make matters worse, we begin to realize that they have known this about us all along!

This new self-awareness frees us to be in community with other people-to live with them, to belong to them, and to be for them. It is, in fact, a prerequisite for an "I" to meaningfully participate in a "we."

Jesus also uses the language of empathy to set the boundaries of the community. Inclusiveness is not an absolute. There have to be boundaries. There wouldn't be any integrity to the body without them. But, the boundaries rarely become barriers to entry.

At first glance, the words hardly seem empathetic. If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the Kingdom maimed, lame, or with one eye than to be thrown into hell.

But, if Mark is writing to a community that is being persecuted, then the prescription seems more than caring. It seems idealistic. You might expect the community to want the life of those who deserted or informed on others.

What might we demand as punishment for such betrayal, or as a guarantee of our security?

In that light, simply expelling the deserters and informers, cutting them off or tearing them away from the body, sounds like undeserved leniency-especially when you realize that the possibility of forgiveness is never withdrawn.

Finally, Jesus uses the language of empathy to encourage the ongoing life of the community. "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

Jesus never promised that all of these new relationships would be fun or easy. He never said that we would all become friends-at least in the way we commonly use that word.

The truth is that relationships within a community of faith are often frustrating and annoying. Someone is always reminding you to come to church, or to make your pledge, or to fulfill your promise to volunteer. It's not always immediately clear that what you are being given is a gift!

But, if the first rule of the language of empathy is self-awareness, then the second is commitment. Community depends on the willingness to be together, to live in the same place at the same time. This commitment must come before the inevitable conflict, not after it.

We often assume that if we could just agree with each other, then we could enjoy community. I think the opposite is true. We won't agree with each other until we enjoy a sense of community. As a friend of mine likes to say, "our commitment to live together is richer than the mistakes we make."

This is what Jesus is talking about when he talks about salt. Salt appears often in the Hebrew Scriptures as a symbol of the covenant between God and his people. To have salt is to be at peace. To share salt with someone is to share fellowship with her, to be in covenant with her.

The Gospel of Mark talks a lot about community. Mark uses the language of empathy to remind us of the self-awareness and commitment required for us to learn to recognize and release the gifts of various members of the community. But, he also reminds us that real community involves the presence of God.

We engage in community building activities the way a farmer might prepare the ground for planting. She can turn the ground, pull the weeds, and water the plants. But, she can't manufacture the seeds from which the plants grow. They have to come from somewhere else.

Real community, in other words, is not just a spiritual experience. It's an experience of the Holy Spirit. It's a gift from God.

Early in the summer, one of my high school classmates died.

David spent the end of his life in what I have come to call "cancer world." It is an all too familiar story. He was in and out of hospitals, and treatment facilities. He endured a hellish fifty-five chemotherapy treatments. Eventually, the cancer and the chemotherapy-sometimes I'm not sure which is worse-robbed David of his strength.

David's high school roommate, Stuart and Stuart's wife, Anne, became church for David. They all but moved into his house for several months. They did for him what he could not do for himself. They clothed him, and fed him, and bathed him. They got him in and out of bed. They got him in and out of the house. They got him in and out of the hospital.

When David finally died, we collected a small gift for Stuart and Anne, just enough to let them take a vacation. They thanked us with a picture that they had taken of members of our class attending the Memorial Service.

As I looked at the picture, I saw the faces of the boys that I had known years ago-now transformed into men. They stood next to each other, draped their arms around each other's shoulders, and smiled at the camera.

I knew that the words they had spoken to each other that day had their roots in the language of empathy. I could see it in their bodies. I could see it in how they held their hands, planted their feet, and focused their eyes.

As I continued to look at the picture, I saw something else. I noticed a pair of khaki pants, a whole shelf of white oxford button-down shirts, a crimson red and navy blue club striped tie, and more than one blue blazer!

It made me smile. I realized then that we know what it means to live with other people, to belong to them, and to be for them. We know what it means to be part of a community. We know what it means for an "I" to become a "we."

And, I realized again the sacred truth that the language of empathy reveals to us. My friend got it right, I think. "Our commitment to live together is richer than the mistakes we make."

It's a gift from God.

Amen.

You might be interested to know -

- The Rev. Palmer Temple is my friend whose quote about the richness of commitment I reference. Palmer is an Episcopal priest and therapist now practicing in Atlanta, Georgia.
- If you want to learn more about the theme of Jesus' ministry as the creation of a new community, then you might explore Chad Myers' commentary, titled "Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus" (New York: Orbis Books, 1988). I have taken from Myers both (a) the nonviolent interpretation of the hard saying about losing hands, feet and eyes to avoid being thrown in to hell, and (b) the prescription to "have salt in yourselves." See pages 262 - 264 of the Twentieth Anniversary Edition.
- If you want to learn more about the true meaning of community, then you might start by reading "The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace," by Scott Peck (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). I have borrowed from Peck the presumption of inclusivity, as evidenced by the questions asked by the community about admission of new members, the need for community to precede agreement, and the idea that the essence of community is something external to and independent of the group. See Chapter III.
- I was inspired to interpret Mark as talking about community in a language of empathy by a public lecture given by Br. Martin L. Smith SSJE at the General Seminary, New York, on April 14, 1997, during a session of the College for Bishops. A copy of the lecture titled "Pastoral Leadership Today" is available [here](#). Smith talks there about the need to ground the spirituality of pastoral leadership in the gifts of ever-widening empathy. I have borrowed his definition of empathy, which he draws from Paul's claim in 1 Cor. 9 to "have become all things to all people."
- Members of "Old Fashioned Sunday School," the class that I teach on Sundays with Canon Knowlton, will also recognize some of Jonathan Haidt in what I have said about self-awareness and intuition, particularly as it relates to racial, gender, and sexual bias. Haidt explores these concepts in his book titled, "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion" (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012). See pages 57 - 59.