

Empathy at Church

March 14, 2021 | Romans 12:15

Overview

Probably no skill or value is held in higher esteem today than empathy. It's virtually the prerequisite for being a good human being. If you're not high in empathy, well, *what's wrong with you?*

One downside of this is its effect on our collective moral compass. Placing a premium on feelings, we no longer make moral judgments lest someone feel bad. But the upside is that we're all reminded that we are *feeling* creatures—even more than thinking ones—and these need to be taken seriously. Connecting at an emotional level is what makes relationships real and deep.

Jesus was and is the master empathizer. In fact, he may be the only Person who truly is empathetic. Empathy means “in feeling,” and carries the idea of being inside another's emotions, feeling what they feel. That's really a logical impossibility for us. We do not have each other's brains, hormones, or limbic systems. What we actually express is sympathy which, though out of fashion, means “with feeling.” We read someone else's feelings, understand them, and coming alongside *with* our own similar emotions.

But Jesus, through his incarnation—not to mention his ongoing presence within us by the Holy Spirit—actually is “in feeling” with us. He literally knows and feels exactly what we feel. So whether rejoicing in the joys of others, or weeping at a funeral (John 11:35), Jesus empathizes like no other.

He is our High Priest who can sympathize/empathize, having been tempted in every way just as we are (Hebrews 4:15). He not only knows temptation, but rejection, betrayal, guilt and shame. As Isaiah 53 so beautifully details, he was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.” He knows it all perfectly and omnisciently, from the inside out. So we look to Jesus to grow in empathy, just as we look to him for everything else we need.

Breaking down empathy into its constituent parts, we think about:

- 1. Perspective-taking.** We put ourselves in the other's shoes; we try to see life through their eyes—just as Jesus put on frail human flesh and took the very nature of a servant.
- 2. Staying out of judgment.** It's easy to envy those who succeed, and scorn those who struggle, but true empathy stays out of judgment and seeks first to understand. To understand the backstory; to hear the other's heart; to delay making pronouncements and giving prescriptions. Think of how many times Jesus asked questions of people even though he already knew the answers. May we be just as curious—and more so because we don't have all the answers!

3. Recognizing emotions. An important skill is being able to read and name emotions, in others and in ourselves. Then:

4. Reflecting back. We carefully express what we see and hear, letting the person know we are with them and we get it. Then they have tangible proof that God has not left them nor forsaken them. He will be present in our empathetic love.



Our Transformed Life
Living the Vision of Romans 12

