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Empathy  

_Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort,  
who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to  
comfort those in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God._  
II Corinthians 1:3-4  

_I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate._  
Romans 7: 15  

Story  

Had you met my friend, Dag, you would likely have noticed her physical form first. Dag suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for decades. The disease left her so severely stooped it was almost impossible for her to look forward. Her head aimed down. It twisted her hands until her fingers pointed only sideways. Toes had had to be amputated from her bent feet so she didn’t walk on them. Still, if someone helped her to her feet she was happy to walk. Somehow she readily gripped a pen in those diminished fingers and wrote eagerly. A woman of prayer she rejoiced to live without pain when the arthritis went into remission. She believed her prayers had been answered though the lingering effects in her body were nearly unimaginable.  

To see her only her physical form was not at all to know Dag. She was a student of Russian literature and music. She thrilled to the power of Rachmaninoff, the courage of Shostakovich, and the imaginative harmonies of Prokofieff. She was a marvelous cook and entertained with grace and generosity. She had a wry wit and could level an ego with a single word or a subtle chuckle. She was as informed and engaged politically as anyone I know. Taking pen in gnarled hands, she roused the depths of her Russian mentors and the power of her sardonic wit and told her politicians exactly what she thought they should do.  

I admired Dag in so many ways that it astonished me when I learned she had a deathbed confession. Ironically [from my point of view] her struggle at the end of her life was not physical, but relational. She struggled mightily with how she had treated other people. She wished she had been more patient with conservatives.  

Had I been looking for it, there was a clue there that empathy is not as obvious as it may seem.  

Perspectives  

For the sake of this discussion I shall define empathy as openness. Empathy is a willingness to receive the experience and interpretation of another. Its toolkit includes listening, patience and imagination. One listens with a humility that does not presume to know the other
person’s story. Empathy requires patience because one trusts that there is more to the story than is immediately presented. An empathic person listens and waits until points of connection emerge. I describe this as imaginative because experiences are rarely if ever exactly identical. Our own experiences help us imagine what another may be living. One of the amazing gifts of empathy is unanticipated connections. It is an astonishing and wonderful gift.

It may be more common to say that empathy is “feeling what another feels.” My concern with this definition is haste, concluding too quickly we know what another feels. We may intend this as empathy but we too easily project our own experience on another. For example, in the presence of one who is grieving, I easily assume that the neighbor’s grief is like the grief I have experienced. This haste easily makes experience categorical, misses the neighbor’s experience, nuance, and dynamic complexity. Hasty conclusions miss the profound mystery which is the uniqueness of every experience. Perhaps the opposite of empathy is ideology, which Richard Rohr describes as having the answer before one knows the real question.

In Christian faith empathy is grounded in God’s participation in our lives and the life of the world. The Bible, start to finish, describes a God who is passionately engaged with creation, a creation that struggles with its own refusal to trust, receive, share and love. The incarnation, God becoming human in Jesus, reveals God’s commitment to the creation, God’s involvement in its struggles, and God’s promise to make the creation new. The power of God given in Jesus’ openness, humility and patience is as costly as it is counter-intuitive. Jesus lived this promise even when his passion for justice and belovedness got him killed.

The text from Corinthians grounds our empathy in the humble and compassionate comfort we receive from God. I am amazed that God calls humans as instruments of healing compassion and love. I am as grateful as perplexed that the Bible is a record of called humans who empathize imperfectly. Not even Dag managed patient, open compassion consistently. This empathic participation is somehow both holy and messy. Our mixed efforts at empathy, service, and other things good are held in the steady promise of the Psalmist, promising that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. One of my many conversions happened the day I realized I needed God’s mercy for my inability to be merciful. In John, Jesus says that if we claim to see we are in fact blind. Empathy invites us to claim openness even where [and perhaps because] we cannot yet see.

Beneath the legacies of the likes of Luther and Bonhoeffer, God’s promise in Christ frees us to risk imperfect empathy. I shall hold to this theocentric empathy of Paul as I admit my own learning in inconsistent empathy. My inability to comfort others “with the consolation we have received from Christ” is held in God’s steadfast love which frees us to try and challenges us to listen more deeply.

Implications

If empathy includes openness and listening, senior sermons in the chapel are a singular opportunity for us to listen without interruption as students reflect on a biblical text and their experiences. The breadth of sermons celebrates diverse experience and the distinctiveness of voices even in our little South Dakota bubble. Maybe senior sermons are our own exploration of
the mystery of sixty six books in the Bible--when it comes to the mystery of God, no one voice gets it completely. And each of us resonates with some of those voices more than others.

Do we hear empathy in sermons? And how do we respond if we do not?

Each year in our chapel, as in Scripture and the world, some voices seem rigid. How does one respond to “belonging to God” articulated so simply, clearly and absolutely that it seems to exclude nearly everyone else? It happens from a variety of perspectives and on any number of issues. No doubt it happens to those who listen to my sermons, too. I am admitting here that it took years of listening to the wonderful symphony of student voices before I realized that in concluding a preacher showed no empathy, I was granting even less of it myself.

It took a few years before I realized that many sermons I call rigid also include profound stories of intense pain, anguish, even abuse. I remember a student in particular who burst into tears as she described herself collapsing in the shower during a visit home her freshman year. Five years after their divorce her parents were still fighting. I found new empathy in appreciating why ambiguity and mystery may be too threatening in the painful chaos of her life. Perhaps she needed certainty like a broken bone needs a cast. And the tentative steps to heal such brokenness need lots of support and understanding.

I confess I find it easier to give empathy when it is reciprocal, but I imagine even tax collectors do that. If it is counterintuitive to give comfort where it is not offered, it is also a serious hypocrisy to demand empathy when refusing to give it. I’m grateful Paul gave us language via the Romans, “I do not understand my own actions.” I am learning a measure of patience by learning there is almost always a story beneath a claim. Perhaps even curiosity helps make space for more listening, as in “What on earth would make someone say that?!” It takes faith and practice to trust that this listening will surprise us with places of common understanding, with places of empathy.

Some communities of faith explore bridge building by telling the story of their convictions without revealing their conclusions. Proponents and opponents of abortion, gun control, or the death penalty hear stories of the characters and circumstances that moved them to a conclusion, without revealing their conclusions. Often participants hear a common humanness that changes misunderstanding, caricature and reactivity even if it doesn’t change positions. In some ways this is happening for me when I hear stories that are behind narrow religious conviction. I am writing to pray for more openness, more stories and more acceptance of complexity.

The Gospel returns us again and again to God who authors comfort and holds all who need it. I never had an opportunity to ask Dag what greater patience would have looked like or what she hoped it might accomplish. Having received consolation in Christ for all our afflictions, I pray we find the grace both to offer empathy to one another and in doing so, be surprised by new discoveries of its breadth and power.