

The Gift of Empathy

Show of hands. How many of us think that Jesus was a pretty empathic guy? How many of us would agree with Jesuit priest and author, Father James Martin, who wrote, *“Empathy and compassion are at the heart of Jesus’ life on this earth.”*? And how many of us have the idea that following Jesus asks *us* to have empathy and compassion for others? Would you be surprised, then, to hear that empathy is a sin?

In recent months, I’ve been taken aback by things I’ve seen online that referred to empathy as both a sin and a weakness. Trying to learn more about this strange and disturbing idea, I did a little research and came up with some strange and disturbing results (and some reassuring and hopeful pushback, too). The Rev. Canon Dana Colley Corsello preached a sermon at the National Cathedral, on March 30th, that spoke of some of the backlash aimed at Bishop Mariann Budde following her plea to Trump to have mercy on the most vulnerable among us. According to Corsello,

Her words triggered an avalanche of Christian Nationalist condemnation. Much of it highlighted what her critics literally called “the sin of empathy.” Their argument was that “empathy” amounts to a false gospel of “kindness” that enables a culture of “coddling” and “weakness.” Corsello speaks of a burgeoning hard-right movement that insists people must steel their hearts against stories of pain, loss and suffering to avoid being manipulated.

An NPR piece on this movement quotes several high-profile Christian conservatives: *“Empathy almost needs to be struck from the Christian vocabulary.” “Empathy is dangerous. Empathy is toxic. Empathy will align you with hell.” “Most people have a hard time imagining how empathy could ever be harmful. And therefore, if I’m the devil, where am I going to hide some of my most destructive tactics?”*

How does the devil use empathy? Well, empathy might lead us to advocate for allowing undocumented immigrants, especially those who work so hard on our farms or have fled great violence in their own countries, to stay in the US. But their remaining here is “unjust”—I presume because they haven’t gone through proper legal channels to be here. Their “unjust” way of life separates them from God. Deporting them restores them to a “just” way of life (even, apparently, if deportation is a death sentence), and so brings them closer to God. If you’ve wondered how people who consider themselves Christian can support the current governmental cruelty toward immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, or any of the other groups now under attack, this kind of thinking shows you how. As one online commentator noted, this is *the kind of thinking* that can make burning heretics seem “compassionate.” In addition to being a sin, it seems empathy is also a weakness. On a Joe Rogan podcast in March, Elon Musk declared that

“the fundamental weakness of Western Society is empathy,” a “weakness” of which no one could accuse Musk!

So what is it about empathy that is so “sinful” and “weak”? Empathy involves a willingness to hear another’s feelings, and to do our best to understand those feelings. As Rev. Corsello writes, *empathy is not a feeling. It is the ability to recognize and respond to the reality, emotion, and pain of others. It is putting yourself in one another’s place, understanding their context, seeing things as they see them, even when it doesn’t match with your own experience.*

Empathy moves us from understanding to action, which is why, Corsello contends, *the ability to empathize is a threat to those with a need to control. The arguments about toxic empathy are finding open ears because far right-wing, white evangelicals are looking for a moral framework around which they can justify President Trump’s executive orders and policies, and decrying empathy helps them do that. . . . banishing empathy helps to harden the heart when migrant children are separated from their parents, when Palestinian protesters and so-called “illegals” with suspect tattoos are snatched off our streets in broad daylight, and when funding is slashed for food banks, healthcare, scientific research, and when attacks and erasure of diversity, equity and inclusion continue under the guise of meritocracy when it’s really disguised white supremacy.*

To me, the idea that empathy is either a sin or a weakness, and to proclaim this in a supposedly “Christian” context, is a terrible distortion of all Jesus was and all he tried to teach us to be. Time and again, Jesus took the time to listen to the stories of people from all walks of society, feeling with them in their pain and suffering. There are more stories in the gospels of Jesus’ acts of healing than of any of his other activities, and you cannot be a healer without first listening to, understanding, and deeply caring about, the plight of someone who has come to be healed. This quality of Jesus, perhaps more than any other, characterized his ministry. How dare they call it a sin?

And as for empathy being a weakness, I would argue that it takes great strength to listen to another’s pain, great strength not to turn away from another’s suffering, great strength to go outside our own tribe and small comfort zone to hear things we may not want to hear and see things we may not want to see, in order to be present to the lived reality of people whose lives and experiences are very different from and much more difficult than ours. As far as I can see, those who are weak and in sin here are those who don’t want to care about others and who harden their hearts to the pain and suffering happening all around us.

This coming Friday, we celebrate the Fourth of July, when we remember the freedoms stated as rights— at least for white, propertied men— through a declaration of independence from the rule of a king. And so it seems particularly apropos that our epistle reading contains some impassioned words from the apostle Paul on what it means to be free. Paul believed that the death and resurrection of Jesus was an apocalyptic event that marked the end of the old age

and the beginning of God's new creation. He contends that right relationship with God no longer depends on observing the law given to Moses. We are to live a new life in Christ, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and not the law, in how we order our individual and common lives.

In the couple of centuries leading up to the American Revolution, printed copies of the Bible had become more widely available. People were now able to read the Bible for themselves, and a faithful reading couldn't help but reveal God's call for justice for the poor and the oppressed, Jesus' concern for the least among us, and Paul's declaration that, in Christ, all are equal, all are free. This led inevitably to ideas of fairness, ideas of equality, ideas of human worth, that became foundation stones for our democracy.

And I would propose that understanding and believing in these foundational ideas *depends* on empathy. Why would you care about justice, or equality, or human worth, if you didn't, in Corsello's words, *recognize and respond to the reality, emotion, and pain of others*, if you weren't able to put yourself in another's place, *understanding their context, seeing things as they see them, even when it doesn't match with your own experience*? Rather than being the great weakness of Western Society, empathy may be its great strength, a basis of the very democratic values we hold dear and which are now so glaringly under threat.

We hear, in Paul's letter to the Galatians, that sometimes his ideas of freedom were misunderstood to mean license—"I can do anything I want." We get an interesting window into some of the things that were going on, in the early Christian communities, when we read Paul's list of what happens when we use freedom to "gratify the desires of the flesh":
. . . fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing . . .

Paul makes it very clear that those who do these things have no part in the new creation that Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. Why? Because these things arise out of self-centeredness. Those who do them are thinking only of themselves and not of the good of the community. As Paul reminds the Galatians, we are given freedom, not for self-indulgence but for serving one another. He writes, *do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another*. Individual freedoms must always be balanced by our concern for the needs and the good of others.

Paul goes on to give concrete signs that help us to know when we are living in the kind of freedom Christ intends for us, and not by our own desires and devices. Paul calls these signs the "fruit of the Spirit." When "we live by the Spirit," both our individual lives, and our life in community together, will be characterized by *love, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*, the very things that seem to be missing in current administrative policies and actions that are *unloving, impatient, unkind, ungenerous, unfaithful, ungentle, and clearly out of control*.

As we approach the annual celebration of this nation's Declaration of Independence, I pray that, like Paul, we may reaffirm our belief that *the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* And I hope and pray that our common life as a nation may reaffirm the goodness and strength of empathy, demonstrating *love, patience, kindness, generosity faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

Amen.