

Sermon
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 18th, 2025
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [ACTS 11:1-18](#); [PSALM 148](#); [REVELATION 21:1-6](#); [JOHN 13:31-35](#)

The “sin of empathy”. Some of you will have come across this phrase in the news from our neighbours to the South in recent months. Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde speaks about it in the podcast I included in this week’s newsletter. Those who use this phrase argue that empathy promotes a false gospel of kindness that enables a culture of coddling and weakness, that it makes space for emotional manipulation, that it is toxic.

Empathy it is not a feeling. It is the capacity to recognize and respond to the circumstances, the emotion, and the pain of others. It’s a commitment to putting ourselves in one another’s places, seeking to understand our different contexts. It’s a willingness to try to see things as another sees them, even when it doesn’t match our own experience. It’s a willingness to look at another, and to say: “That could be me.” It has us acknowledge that there is no “other”, that everyone is us, living a different life. Empathy is not toxic. It is at the heart of the Gospel, and it is essential in our humanity.

If Jesus is anything, he is empathic. Jesus, as God, embodied empathy by entering our time and place as a baby, to be with us in the human experience from birth to death.

We’re revisiting John 13 this morning – the same Gospel passage we hear on Maundy Thursday. Context is so important as we hear Jesus’s command to love one another as he loved. Jesus says these words on his last night on earth. He says these words after he has washed the disciples’ feet, after they have broken bread together. He says these words after Judas has betrayed him, by walking away from relationship and connection.

Empathy infuses this scene. Before Jesus speaks this command to love, he says “Where I am going, you cannot come.” Why does he say this? Jesus knows what is

to come. He knows what the disciples will witness in the days ahead: they will see him suffer and die, and they will think that they are looking at death, at failure, at a wasted life. They will be paralyzed by the fear that this is their fate, too. And then...Resurrection! And then...Jesus will show them, and us, that death is not the end. He will show us that what looks like death is change and transformation. What if Jesus says "Where I am going, you cannot come" out of empathy – imagining, feeling, how frightened the disciples will be at first?

We find empathy in the surrounding scenes that John's Gospel brings us. In John 12, we hear that six days before Jesus issues this command to love as he loved, he spent time with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We hear that Mary broke a jar of costly perfume, and anointed Jesus's feet, drying them with her hair. This is empathy! This is Mary, anticipating that Jesus would suffer, and, with empathy, showing him love and compassion to sustain him in that suffering.

Jesus says: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Just as I have loved you – Jesus says to the disciples, and he says to us, love one another as I have loved you. How did Jesus love?

He lived – and loved – with compassion. Jesuit priest and theologian James Keegan describes compassion as a willingness to enter into the chaos of another person's life – to be with them in that chaos. Jesus did this time and again. Empathy goes alongside compassion, it's how God was with us in Jesus, and it is how, as followers of Jesus, we are to be with one another, how we are to love one another the way that Jesus loved and loves us.

We find empathy in our reading from Acts today too. A vision allows Peter to understand that he cannot hinder God, he cannot hinder the movement of the Spirit by making "us and them" distinctions. There was a relinquishing of control as he recognized that God had given the same Spirit to the Gentiles. Peter had empathy – a willingness to acknowledge and accept the experience of the Gentiles, even though it wasn't the same as his. Empathy has us do this in our lives. When we live with empathy, we make room for the Spirit.

Jesus lived and loved with empathy and compassion in a world, at a time and in a place that was dominated by Roman occupation. He lived and loved in a time of rigid systems designed to keep control. Empathy and compassion are a threat to the kind of control that had overtaken that first century Mediterranean world. Empathy and compassion can overturn systems that thrive on love of power, and they do it with the power of love! Empathy and compassion have us fix our gaze on suffering and injustice, and refuse to turn others into abstractions, into data and statistics, into generalizations. Empathy and compassion remain a threat to authoritarian power and control, today...

Jesus came to be with us to show us what God is like, and Jesus showed us a God of compassion, and a God of empathy. We follow Jesus by living and loving as he did. We follow Jesus by choosing empathy, and it is empathy that will change our world.

I commend that podcast included in the newsletter – a conversation between Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde and the hosts of the “We Can Do Hard Things” podcast – to you. Her comments about how we find the strength and resilience to choose love, and empathy and compassion in a world so often dominated by the love of power and control are resonant. She makes clear that there will be times of profound sadness and confusion as we navigate this life, this world. We’re not to deny that – we need places and spaces to feel those feelings – but she says that when she faces outward, she chooses to embody hope, to be a face – a sign – of hope in the world.

God came to be with us in Jesus in a profound act of empathy. To live, and feel, and be with us in our humanity, in chaos and order, in joy and sorrow, and God asks us to be with one another the same way.

Jesus asked the disciples to love one another. He called it a new commandment even though it’s not the first and only time we are called to love in Scripture. What makes it new? It’s the Resurrection that makes it new! All things are made new, as we realize that what looks like death can be change and transformation! This is our hope, again and again, as followers of Jesus. It is this hope that propels us to the margins of our society to act with empathy and compassion and solidarity in dark and difficult situations. It is this hope that gives us the will, the energy to continue to move – to bring change – within the confines of love of

power in the world, within the confines of domination and control, trusting that the power of love is stronger than death, stronger than anything.

Empathy is not toxic, there is no “sin of empathy”. Empathy is at the heart of the Gospel, and it is essential in our humanity. May we have empathy, may we have compassion, and may we have hope. May we choose to let that hope show, to let love show, today, and every day, in Jesus’ name. Amen.