

Editorial: Incarnation, empathy & the failure of sympathy

January 10, 2014

Sunday school offers a bounty of blessings. One of the best is this: We learn from each other.

This happened in our class the other Sunday. The lesson focused on God's generosity, and we looked at a slew of Scriptures and considered a passel of possibilities. Eventually, we discussed the Incarnation, how God took on the vulnerabilities and limitations of human flesh to live among us and expressed divine love to us.



Editor Marv KnoxThe key passage for this concept was Philippians 2:5-8, where the Apostle Paul describes “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. ...”

The incarnation

In the Incarnation, God poured God's own self into a human body. In Jesus, God lived among us and understood—from our perspective—pain, fatigue, joy, humor, hunger, loneliness, limitation, affection, love, rejection, temptation and wonder.

The Incarnation poses all kinds of questions, two of which are: Why was Jesus' humanity important? And why did God have to/choose to take on human frailty and finitude?

From over by the door, a class member spoke up. "For me, one important reason God became flesh was empathy," she said. "Of course, God is sympathetic. But because of the Incarnation, we know God knows exactly what it's like to be human. Sympathy is fine, but empathy is far better."

That sister offered strong spiritual food, and I've been digesting it ever since. One thought keeps recurring: We're more like God—we more fully reflect God's generous love—when we empathize rather than sympathize.

Sympathy vs. empathy

Of course, sympathy is fine and noble. Being [sympathetic](#) means we "care about and are sorry about someone else's trouble, grief, misfortune, etc." Sympathy motivates us to perform acts of kindness and mercy. Sympathy propels us to do good deeds. The world is a better place because of sympathy.

But sympathy is a frail cousin to empathy. Through [empathy](#), we actually "understand and share another person's experiences and emotions." We imagine what it's like to be them, to feel their grief and pain and aspirations. If we're empathetic, we will perform acts of mercy and kindness. But we're also more inclined to do something about the causes of their suffering.

Sympathy seeks to alleviate the symptoms of suffering; empathy strives to eliminate the causes of suffering. Sympathy seeks relief; empathy strives for justice. Sympathy requests consolation; empathy demands righteousness.

The Incarnation pronounces judgment on American Christianity. We're

pretty good at conjuring up sympathy, but far too often, we're tone deaf at empathy. We feel good when we're sympathetic, and we do some good, too. But in an increasingly divided society—liberal and conservative, rich and poor, red and blue, have and have-not—sympathy may be a major factor in preventing us from actually living as Jesus would live if he were with us physically.

Conversely, empathy could change the balance of the culture wars. Through their identification with others, empathetic Christians are winsome, welcoming ambassadors for Jesus and bridge-builders to unbelievers trapped on islands of misunderstanding.

Sympathy without empathy is dangerous

Sympathy without empathy is dangerous for at least two reasons. First, sympathy can inoculate us from commitment to change the causes of pain and suffering. We do good deeds, and we feel we've done our part. So, we don't think we need to do more, and situations worsen. Second, when sympathy wears away, good-but-tired people often despise those they sympathized.

If we take the name Christian, we claim to be "little Christs," expressing the living, breathing will of Jesus here on Earth. If we embrace the Incarnation, then we identify with the suffering and weakness of folks Jesus called "the least of these." In knowing their pain, we transcend sympathy and empathize. Then we seek not only mercy, but justice.