

25 April 2021

Sermons: Empathy

Jesus said, "I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14).

When most people go a Funeral Home, they don't know what to say to a family who has just lost a loved one. When my own father died thirty years ago, several individuals told me "I know how you feel. I lost my own father a few years ago." While I appreciated their effort to be kind, what they said was not really true. My relationship with my father was unique. Their bond with their father may have been close but it was not the same as the one between my father and I. They couldn't really know how I was feeling. If they had said, "It must be hard for you to lose your father. I found it difficult when my own father died", they would have shown they had a similar experience which connected them to me. Empathy is the ability to understand someone else's situation, even when it is different from your own.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says he (the Good Shepherd) knows his disciples just as they know him. By doing so, he tries to explain the empathy which exists between him and them.

The Good Shepherd Discourse (**John 10**) is a continuation of the story of the Healing of the Man Born Blind (**John 9**). After the man is healed by Jesus, he is challenged by all sorts of people. Some of those who earlier saw him beg question whether he is the same man who was blind. A number of Pharisees claim because the healing took place on a Sabbath, it was not a miracle from God. The man's parents, afraid of being expelled from the Synagogue, distanced themselves from the proceedings. Each of these experiences was likely shared those who listened and responded to Christ's (the Shepherd's) voice. When Jesus said he knew his followers (sheep) he likely meant it on multiple levels. First, when "the Word became flesh and lived among us" Christ embraced the human condition with all its challenges like hunger, cold and pain. Second, he encountered situations similar to those faced by his followers and the Blind Man: some people doubted whether Christ's miracles were a sign of God's power; when he cleansed the Temple its authorities challenged his authority; and his family tried to end his ministry by bringing him home. Finally, as was revealed after the Cleansing of the Temple, Jesus knew whether people really believed in him. This means he would have understood the doubts and limits of their faith and so knew what was really in their hearts. This empathy meant although there was a difference between their experiences and his, he could place himself in their situation.

During this Covid 19 pandemic, many people have faced difficult experiences. There are essential workers who have worried every day about the possibility they might contract the virus on the job or bus ride home. There are doctors and nurses caring for the sick who have wondered how long they can keep on going. There are those who are sick of the lockdowns and health rules designed to limit the spread of Covid 19 and just want things to get back to normal. When some of these people lash out at those around them or refuse to follow the rules it is easy to condemn them. It is hard to show empathy towards them. While Jesus knew his sheep (disciples) and those who were not part of his flock, he made no distinctions about who he loved. His empathy meant he was able to understand everyone in their particular situation. His disciples who knew him and followed his voice attempted to do the same. This did not cause those who despised them to have a change of heart. After all, Jesus still died on the Cross and many disciples were still persecuted. Empathy requires the desire to really understand someone's situation and why they respond to it in a particular way, even when we would have done so differently. It requires we never lose sight of the fact the most annoying and selfish individual in the world was still created in the image and likeness of God. False empathy means we appear to know people. Real empathy demands we really do.

Christ the Good Shepherd gave us the example of true empathy. While none of us can know him as perfectly as he knows us, he calls us to know each other to the best of our ability.

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