

I was at a Stewardship conference yesterday. They asked, “what is the main teaching of your church.” Some churches have an incredible feeding ministry to those in need. Some churches have big schools. The presenter (after hearing from the diocesan director of communication who loves All Angels) asked specifically about All Angels. I said, “Our mission is to bring the Living Christ to those inside and outside the Church. For us, that means we deepen the relationship each person has with God, with themselves and their neighbors.” The presenter asked, “What then do you typically preach on?” I said, “Christian ethics.”

You might be surprised by that. At least I hope so because I don’t start each sermon with: here’s a lesson on Christian ethics. ... except for today.

Here’s a lesson on how to follow, or imitate Christ in our own day.

Of all the Christian ethics and virtues: faith, perseverance, prudence, forgiveness, patience, charity, wisdom, courage, love and empathy; which one do you think is the most important? Most people say love, and yes, it’s very important. But, the most important is courage. Without courage, we would be unable to do any of the others. It takes courage to love, to forgive, to do the right thing, to be charitable, to seek wisdom and be patient. Second, however, to courage, is empathy.

People get sympathy and empathy confused. To make it simple, there are no empathy cards at the Halmark Store. Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone – sorry for your illness, sorry for your loss. Empathy is not feeling sorry for someone but rather feeling what the other person is feeling. It’s not expressed with a card, it’s in person or over the phone. Empathy is sitting with someone in their misery. Even if you have never been through what the other person is going through, empathy leads us to be generous with our time and ourselves to understand what the other person is thinking or feeling. Empathy is what our great Christian tradition was build upon. Paul wrote in the Letter to the Romans: we weep when they weep, we rejoice when they rejoice. That’s empathy.

Our Christian ethics and virtues are based on Jesus’s life. No one has been or will be as courageous as Jesus. Or as generous. Or as forgiving. Or as empathetic. Nevertheless, our Christian way of life calls us to imitate him the best we can.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath. He stops what he is doing when he sees a woman who is unable to stand up straight. (There were no chairs or pews in the synagogue in Jesus’s day; they stood and Jesus sat and taught) He stopped what he was doing, called her over, prayed for her and laid his hands on her. Immediately, she stood up straight and was cured. One way to look at this is that Jesus had empathy for her. It’s hard to imagine two different people – she, a woman, was (in Jesus’s words) bound by Satan for eighteen years and unable to stand up straight; he is the Son of God. Yet, he had empathy. He didn’t feel sorry for her, he empathized. This teaches us that we don’t have to live the way someone lives to feel empathy for them. I have been involved in recovery ministry and helping those who were bound by addiction

to alcohol. I myself have not been bound by it; yet, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I have empathy and have helped many who are.

Our first lesson this morning from the prophet Jeremiah, he said to the Lord, “How can you call me, I am just a boy?” The Lord responded: I knew you before you were born. God has empathy. A whole lot of empathy. It’s no wonder, really, because we believe God is our creator. Being the created means God knew us before we even knew ourselves.

To live like Christ nowadays means to be empathetic to others and ourselves.

It was a hot summer day in San Diego. A parishioner was walking into a grocery store when she heard some whimpering. There was a dog tied up to the bike rack. It was straining against the leash to get to the cement bowl of water just below the outdoor water faucet. The dog could see the water in the bowl but it could not get to it. What would you do?

The parishioner held the leash with her left hand and untied the knot with her right and then gently let the dog move one foot over to the water. Just then, the owner of the dog came out of the store. (Of course) She asked, “What are you doing? That’s my dog.” Again, what would you do?

The parishioner took the route of empathy (and not shaming and blaming). She said, “Your dog was thirsty, so I helped. I have a dog. One day if you saw my dog was thirsty, I hope that you’d do the same thing.” She then handed the leash to the owner and walked into the store.

Back to our Gospel lesson. Right after the woman was healed, the religious leader spoke up. He was indignant because the rule is to do no work on the Sabbath (healing is considered work). Jesus had empathy for him too. And, frankly, so do I. I studied law, and I don’t like it when rules get broken. Jesus came not to abolish, or break, the Law but to fulfill it. In a different telling of this story, Jesus asked the religious leader: Do you have a donkey? He replied, yes. If you donkey is thirsty on the Sabbath, would you untie it and bring it water to drink? He replied, yes. Jesus said, if you can unbind your donkey on the Sabbath why can’t I unbind this woman?

A midrash tale along the same lines:

Jesus asked, “Do you have children?”

The leader replied: Yes.

Have they ever had a fever?

Yes.

On the Sabbath?

Yes.

Would you take a cloth, go to the well, get some water, make the cloth cold and wet and place it on your child’s forehead for comfort and peace... on the Sabbath?

Yes.

Why then can I also not provide comfort and peace on the Sabbath?

Empathy involves generosity of time to understand the other person. It takes seeking wisdom and also reframing your experience with the experience that the other person is going through. Empathy takes patience and fortitude. And, of course, empathy takes courage.

Empathy, not judging others, is in part of why the Christian Church became the most populous faith on the planet. In our day and time, it is easier to invite someone to the faith with empathy than with blaming and shaming.

One last thing. Empathy requires curiosity. How curious are you about yourself? Have you taken the time to reflect on what makes you tick? Or what ticks you off? Consider being generous with your time with yourself. Instead of shaming and blaming yourself, consider taking the time to be empathetic with your innermost thoughts. Jesus calls us through his life and the virtues he left us to be kind and empathetic with ourselves and with our neighbors.