

The Ministry of Empathy
Hebrews 5: 1-10 and Isaiah 53:4-6
October 17, 2021
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There is a common phrase we hear, “don’t judge a person until you have walked a mile in their shoes.” I agree that is a good and true saying. If we are unwilling or unable to understand the actions of another from their perspective and life circumstances, we may judge too harshly or blame them for their situation when in all reality we are all trying to do the best we can. But to really begin to walk in another person’s shoes we must first take off our own. Shoes is a metaphor for our situations and lived experience. Shoes are not who we are, but more about the way our life experiences have shaped the way we view the world.

Now there are all kinds of social experiments to simulate this. If you have ever watched “undercover Boss” on TV you know what I mean. The premise of the show is that the CEO of a large franchise or corporation seeks to gain some insight into what is really happening with their business. They dress up in disguise and go undercover as an entry level worker. They tend to experience the good, the bad and the ugly sides of their work. They also learn what are some of the everyday struggles of employees at the lower end of the business. They also often see how hard and dedicated these workers are in the face of other factors in their lives like dealing with a sick relative, being a single parent or going to school full time while working full time. These Undercover Bosses also see the bad sides of people, usually people of authority that are abusive, mean or downright selfish, unfit to be a supervisor or co-worker. We see the boss become more understanding, compassionate and even be changed by their experience. They finally see how shortcomings in their business model is adding to the hardships of their workers.

You see, that phrase, “walk a mile in my shoes.” Is really a call for empathy, compassion and mercy. Think with me for a moment of times in your life you grew in compassion because of an experience you went through. For me, I grew in empathy when I experienced under employment and struggled to pay my mortgage for nearly year. During that time we visited food pantries on a regular basis and experienced the different ways people seeking assistance are treated. Before this experience I was often a bit suspect of people’s real need for help. Now I know how much humiliation and courage it takes to ask for help. I have worked with the East Church staff and volunteers here at East Church to first offer compassion and a listening ear when people call for assistance or come to the door. Every week we are helping someone address their needs with food, or gas or bus passes and each time I wish I could do more. Just this week I have had three people seek help with housing.

Life circumstances shape us in many ways, but I hope they help you and I to be more compassionate and patient people for others. Sometimes life can make us hard, callous or overly judgmental of others, but today’s reading in Hebrews reminds us of how Jesus, as our High Priest is compassionate and caring, because he has walked in our shoes. The shoes of being human. Hebrews 5:2-3 says, “The high priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since they are subject to weakness; and because of this they must offer sacrifice for their own sins as well as for those of the people.”

You may recall that Jesus is also called Immanuel in scripture, God with us, and we equate the words of Isaiah 53 to Jesus as the suffering on the cross for us. Bearing in his own body the sins of the world. But this week as I was meditating on these passages I saw and heard something new.

A few weeks ago I mentioned that we would be experimenting with the use of language with the Lord’s Prayer as a spiritual exercise. Each month I will be putting a different translation or rendition of the Lord’s prayer in the service. I encouraged all of us to pay attention to how the meaning of this beloved prayer may change or grow as we use

slightly different words. Now the essential meaning is not lost, but I have heard from some who were unhappy with this while others have said that it has been interesting. They found they needed to slow down and think of the words they were saying. So, I hope you try it some more and see if it deepens your understanding of this beloved prayer.

So, this morning you may have noticed that I did a similar thing with the scriptures. What I did, was use inclusive language by using the singular they and them in the Isaiah text and in Hebrews. How many noticed? According to the Oxford Dictionary “Singular they has become the pronoun of choice to replace he and she in cases where the gender of the antecedent – the word the pronoun refers to – is unknown, irrelevant, or nonbinary, or where gender needs to be concealed. It’s the word we use for sentences like “everyone loves his mother.” Today it is more common to say Everyone loves their mother to show that everyone means any child regardless of gender. I know that some may argue that is wrong that they is plural, but according to The Oxford English Dictionary the use of a singular they goes back to 1375.” I also used it extensively earlier when talking about The Undercover Boss and you probably didn’t even notice.

Again, this is a spiritual experiment or spiritual exercise. Christian theology has seen Isaiah 53 to be about Jesus for centuries. Granted that is not how Jewish scholars see it and a strict reading in context shows that the pronoun refers to Israel or Jerusalem not a single individual. Our Christian theology has re-cast many chapters in Isaiah to be about Jesus, John the Baptist and even Mary to boost the prophetic authority of Christ. These Isaiah texts are some of the most familiar Old Testament texts quoted at Christmas and Easter. So today I changed the pronoun from masculine to a singular they to neutralize the gender of the person named here. This passage is so familiar to me, that when I heard the pronoun of they and them it was quite jarring to me. But as I read it out loud a second time it also cracked open a new understanding for me that I want to share with you.

So in today's reading we hear,

“4 Surely they have borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted them stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

5 But they were wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon them were the punishment that made us whole, and by their bruises we are healed.

As I read this familiar passage I began to see all of the different theys who have been afflicted, those others have seen as cursed of God and who have been wounded by our own sins, our transgressions of failing to love and care for them. We see all the time how discrimination and religious condemnation is used to dehumanize and wound others. But when we are confronted by our own atrocities we repent and seek healing. Like how the Children's March of 1963 in Birmingham Alabama forced the nation to see the dehumanizing effects of Jim Crow and Racism. It was that event that pushed President Kennedy to sign the Civil Rights Executive order and begin to change federal law to dismantle Jim Crow.

We see Isaiah 53 and Hebrews 5 how Jesus became the suffering servant and the compassionate priest for humanity through his incarnational ministry. But we tend to downplay how we too are called to suffer for the sake of the Gospel and be a priest for the people to bring about healing. Jesus became the other, the rejected and down cast, the stricken of God. This passage not only takes on new meaning, it expands our understanding of God's incarnational work in our world. Our healing that comes in the final line shows that this healing comes when we see the bruises, when we are moved by compassion to heal them, then we too are made whole, we are healed and forgiven.

Jesus as our high priest models for us the ministry of compassion and grace. By using the inclusive they we are able to hear and see ourselves also as priests in this ministry of compassion and grace and seek the healing of the world. We are called by Christ to walk in the shoes of others and to grow in compassion and love just as Christ did.