A Second Look at Empathy:

Starting Where You Are

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Online worship Sunday, June 14, 2020
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #1000 "Morning Has Come," "Get by with a Little Help (Lennon/McCartney)," #1008, "When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place."
Piano: 2nd mvmt, Sonatina, M. Ravel. Song without Words, Op. 53 No. 3, F. Mendelssohn

Reflection by Fred Best, Worship Associate (printed after homily)
Reading: "Running for Your Life," a community poem for Ahmaud Arbery on NPR (click link)

Homily

This homily or short sermon is the second in a series I'm doing on the practice of empathy. Last month, I gave you a description of it from a new book by Jamil Zaki, a professor of psychology.[1] Empathy is the ability to consider, imagine and appreciate the experience of others. Sometimes empathy is emotional—to feel some of the pain of another's injury, loss, or fear. Sometimes it comes from thinking, wondering or learning what it would be like to be a person… in a different religion, for example, or someone in a desperate situation. Sometimes it comes from listening to what another has to say. We practice empathy when we recognize our common humanity, *and* when we realize that we don't all experience the world in the same way. I closed that homily by saying that we can train ourselves in empathy. We can add more of it into the world. The world needs more of it.

In my Friday morning open house on Zoom last week, I asked members to reflect on empathy. How had they seen it in action? How had they shown empathy? Have they been on the receiving end of it?

One person told us that a family member had reached out—a reconnection. After many years of separation, a reconciliation. For so long, nobody in the family had communicated. Even during the pandemic, nobody had made an outreach to this person from the rest of the family, all of whom were in together in another state. However, after a big life transition for one sibling, that sibling reached out. In conversation, the two of them started comparing stories of their experience of the family. "I understand what you've been going through," one said to the other. Sometimes the practice takes courage, and it always calls for listening.

In our discussion of empathy, another member said, "I have difficulty telling someone: 'I understand what you're going through,' because I can't truly say that." I agree. It's only on *Star Trek* on television where a couple of the characters have automatic and natural empathy—and they aren't 100 percent human beings! To practice empathy means we *try* to be open and present. Doing so calls us to humility before another person's unique experience.

In other conversations I've had with some of you online or by phone, thoughtful members have raised some doubts. One person wondered: "Should I have empathy for the current president, when his cruel actions, violent rhetoric, and self-centered immaturity outrage me so much? Why does a president who shows no empathy… deserve any?" At the same time, however, this member was able to say, "I can imagine that right now Donald Trump is probably afraid and angry." To be sure, understanding another's experience doesn't mean we have to put up with his behavior. Empathy doesn't mean people can't be held accountable for their actions. Empathy shouldn't let someone off the hook.

Another member asked us: "Should I have empathy for those who hate me and want to hurt me?" For example, what about the ones who attack people of color, Jews, Muslims, transgender, lesbian, gay or bisexual people—the ones who cause harm/with guns, fists, words, or government policy? No, I wouldn't expect empathy for a perpetrator. Indeed, we need more empathy for people who are vulnerable and those who've been kept on the margins of society.

Showing empathy for someone who wants to hurt you is a burden that no vulnerable person should be expected to bear. At a trial, when a defendant is convicted of a murder or a hate crime, it can be amazing to hear a victim's family express forgiveness. To hear them affirm the humanity of the perpetrator can be very moving. But nobody should bear the feeling that you ought to. You may *choose* to show your empathy, but you don't owe it.

Anne Lamott is a California writer whose efforts to live out her Christian faith are both moving and funny. On the ethical challenge of *loving your enemies*, Lamott says if you're going to try such spiritual heavy lifting, you should probably start your work with somebody a lot less imposing than Adolf Hitler. In other words, if we're going to work on empathy, forgiveness, or compassion, we should start small. Start where you are.

It's pretty hard to extend empathy toward another if we can't apply it to ourselves. Perhaps this is the reason behind many of the grudges and resentments we human beings hold. The less "in touch" we are with our own pain, sadness or fear, the less likely it is that we can try to imagine, understand or listen to the situation of other people.

After starting with ourselves, perhaps *then* we can consider extending some grace to others, such as that driver who was taking too long at the intersection after the stoplight had turned green.

Anne Lamott also has written: "You can assume that you have created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people that you do."

I have a good friend who is a good person. She lives alone in a house on a road in the center of a small town. It's a rural area. Nice rolling hills. Nice and quiet. A few years ago, a young couple moved up from a big city and bought the house next door. She had them over for dinner to be a good neighbor.

Later, they installed a chicken coop—in their front yard. In the August heat, they slaughtered a chicken in the front yard. They also let their chickens wander. My friend has a herding dog, but she has an electronic invisible fence to keep it home, keep it in her yard. But the chickens didn't care, so they came over to her back porch. Of course, a herding dog has good intentions and a strong work ethic. Her dog's work sent home two mortally wounded hens. The neighbors were furious. My friend of course didn't have to apologize, but she did. When she tried to explain the reason for the sad outcome to them, they literally turned their backs on her.

Now, they have added a pig enclosure, with pigs. It's in the side yard. They still give her the cold shoulder. In a moment of reflection, she strives for empathy: "Maybe they're afraid," she says to me. "Maybe they feel in over their heads with all they took on by moving to the country. Or maybe they don't have the emotional skills to consider the impact of their decisions on others," she says.

In another moment, however, she blurts out: "I hate my pig neighbors!" So you see, my friend can imagine what might have caused them to behave in ways that annoy her. But sometimes she doesn't want to. She says there is something tempting about nursing our grudges. It can feel satisfying to withhold recognition of another's full humanity, at least for a little while. But it doesn't bring much peace to the soul. At least her grudges don't. Nor do mine.

Recognizing our own impulses, our frustrations, and our temptations—that is a kind of self-empathy. It's a good practice Sometimes it takes another person to help us talk through our attitudes and reactions. Or perhaps we can think it through by writing, or praying about it, or carving out some time for quiet, or going for a stroll.

Self-empathy means bearing witness to ourselves in all our human complexity, with an understanding heart. And then, we can expand our awareness to others. We try to extend an understanding heart out beyond ourselves.

This is how we can expand the circle of empathy. Even when we are frustrated or hurt. Even as we hold other people accountable for the harms they've cause. We still can strive to recognize our common humanity.

The practice of empathy is to consider, imagine and appreciate the experience of others. It is to try to put ourselves in their place, without presuming to know what their experience is like for them. It is to listen, in humility to what others have to say.

The purpose of empathy is peace. It starts with healing in our own hearts. It can extend outward, as a force for healing in the world. May it bring peace. May peace be in our hearts, peace be in our lives, and peace be in our world. Amen.

Personal Reflection: Empathy and Action by Fred Best, Worship Associate

Show me the alley, show me the train,
Show me a hobo who sleeps out in the rain,
And I'll show you a young man with so many reasons why
There but for fortune, go you or go I

Few words have touched me as deeply as this classic song by Joan Baez.
Yet I find that putting myself in the shoes of another is a constant struggle.
When does empathy govern what we do as well as how we feel?
When does it cause us to cross the line to action?
There's a tendency to think that empathy, compassion and love are the same thing.
They're not.

Empathy is our capacity to go beyond ourselves, to listen to another's reality, to make ourselves larger by trying to understand the feelings of another.

Compassion is **caring** about another person or being.

Love is doing something. It is an act. It is an act of comforting sorrow, righting a wrong, making something better.

I'm haunted by a recent memory.

It's about a man I don't really know, but a man that has profoundly affected me.

He symbolizes many others, a kind of cumulative human presence.

His name is George Floyd.

I can only attempt to put myself in his shoes. First, shocked and confused by needless violence when he was apprehended for a questionable and minor crime. Then, moments later, finding himself unable to breath as he was held down by three officers in a lethal choke hold. Struggling with the last air in his lungs he cried, "I can't breath."

A simple, basic claim of human existence:

"I can't breath."

The darkness of his last moments is hard to contemplate.

His last human contact was the boot of malice and wanton disregard for his humanity.

Out of this abyss came his last words, barely audible from a man with no breath left to speak, a plea to a distant memory of human caring.

"Mama."

Most of us experienced this tragic event from the safety and comfort of white privilege.

We can only try to understand and feel the desperate horror of George Floyd's last moments, the pain and remorse of his family and friends, and the rage and hurt from relentless injustice experienced by our black brothers and sisters.

But our eyes can no longer turn away. We've seen the naked existence of cold brutality and hatred, not once, but time and again. We can no longer avoid the pain that spreads like a cancer through every corner of our society. We've allowed it to exist for too long.

The image of George Floyd's last moments recycles, time and again, through my mind and feelings.

I can no longer avoid, minimize or intellectualize what happened to him and countless others.

I have not walked in his shoes.

But his experience has become a part of me.

It's become too vivid, too odious, to real to let pass as a fleeting moment of empathy.

I have seen too much.

I need to join empathy and compassion with love and action.

I have too often stood silent in the presence of hatred, racism and injustice.

I need to face my accountability for what I have ***not*** done.

I have no excuse for sitting on the sidelines.

I must do more. I must find a **way to act**.

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[1] Jamil Zaki, *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* (New York, 2019: Crown).