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Feel the Love

For several months now, I have been pondering the power of empathy. It seems there is quite a bit of varying opinions on what the difference is between sympathy and empathy. So for the purpose of being sure we are on the same page for this topic today, I want to begin by sharing what I believe and understand is the definition of sympathy and empathy, at least for me.

Sympathy and empathy both have the Greek word “path” in them so they both relate to feeling. Sympathy speaks of how we can imagine the feelings of others. We sympathize when a person loses someone they love to death or divorce. We sympathize when someone has cancer. We can imagine, whether or not we have experienced it, how painful a situation might be. “Sym” is the prefix which means “with”; we feel with someone else. We can sympathize without saying a word, perhaps with a hug or caring look. When we sympathize with someone else, we agree that they should feel bad.

Empathy, on the other hand, is when we feel “into” their pain. In the current usage of the word empathy, as opposed to the historical meaning – for you etymologist types, empathy is superior to sympathy and is “other-focused”. Empathy is deeper than sympathy and not only involves the understanding of a person’s feelings but does something to lessen the pain. When we empathize with someone else, we don’t just agree that they should feel badly in their current situation, we enter into their feelings and understand their feelings or thoughts. We can feel their pain, whether or not we have experienced the same pain.

To sympathize is to give your handkerchief to someone who is crying. To empathize is to cry with them.

In Brazil there is a saying that if you’re stuck in a hole, a sympathetic person will get into the hole with you, and the empathic person will give you a rope so you can get out of the hole.

To empathize is to acknowledge another’s pain AND to help them through it.

This is an important topic for me for two reasons. One is I experienced both sympathy and empathy during this last year. Empathy is definitely superior. Two, because I had a dream where I was teaching the difference between the two, complete with points and illustrations. Wish I’d gotten up and written that down!

The purpose of my writing today is to encourage us all to go beyond sympathy in our relationship with people who are hurting and to begin to express empathy. Now I do understand that we cannot personally be empathetic with large numbers of people all at the same time so this is not supposed to be a guilt trip. But there are some people who cross out lives’ paths that we need to avail ourselves to in the power of empathy.

When is the last time you personally expressed empathy to another? The last time you gave of your heart, your words, your time in order to give another a “rope” to help them get out of the hole?

I thought of Jesus this morning as I thought of the power of empathy. In the travels of a Jewish person of his day, they would go all the way around Samaria instead of taking the short route through Samaria because they considered the Samaritans half-breeds and unworthy of their association with them. Yet Jesus told his disciples that he “needed” to go through Samaria. He needed to give a “rope” to a woman there.

Jairus came to Jesus begging for the life of his daughter. In the middle of this exchange, a woman touched Jesus believing that she would be well if she could just touch his clothes. She was healed and then Jesus stopped and ministered to her some more. Shortly some people came and told Jairus not to trouble Jesus any more because his daughter was, in fact, dead already. But Jesus went to Jairus home and raised his daughter from the dead and then told the people to feed her. He gave Jairus a “rope”.

When multitudes of people followed Jesus into a “deserted” place to hear his teaching, Jesus was moved with empathy for them and taught them and then fed them by multiplying the bread and fish. He gave them a “rope”.

When Peter, stepping out onto the sea to walk to Jesus, began to be afraid and sink, Jesus reached out and caught him. He gave Peter a “rope”.

When Lazarus died, Jesus cried bitterly with Lazarus’ sister Mary and then he raised Lazarus from the dead, giving Mary and Martha a “rope”.

Sometimes Jesus offered a rope to people and they did not take it. Even though he knew ahead of time that they would refuse his offer, he offered anyway.

And on the cross, Jesus not only sympathized with us because of our sin, he empathized with us and gave us all a “rope” even though it cost him a season of separation from God, physical trauma and pain, emotional pain, and spiritual pain as he literally took our sin into his physical, emotional, mental body.

As I thought back about the last year, I thought of those who sympathized with me. I remember one fellow minister who told me that he felt sorry for me. It really angered me. Something was wrong with his response. Because of his relationship with me, he should have offered empathy, but he did not. He sympathized about my pain, but he did not empathize with me.

I remember returning home from a two-week intensive counseling experience. I was distraught as I thought about stepping back into a stormy situation. I walked into my house to find that some friends had cleaned my house,

redecorated some rooms, and added special touches here and there. On my kitchen table was a huge, huge homemade card that said in big letters, "Feel the love" and inside were personal notes. I was overwhelmed with tears and comfort and empathy. They gave me a "rope".

And there were many others who offered a "rope" to me during this season. Some friends brought me chocolates and flowers.

One beautiful rope was offered by my daughter who told me I did not have to be strong for her. I cried, and she held me.

I believe more than ever that we in the Body of Christ must do more than sympathize with those who are hurting, whether it be those who don't know Christ at all or those who do know Him. We must empathize.

For after all, if we are part of His body and He feels the pain of others, should we not also feel that pain? Sometimes we say that we are His hands extended. We love the sound of those words. But perhaps we should look at our hands for rope-burn.

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