

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 4, 2018

The Empathy of the Cross

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Like all good preachers, the writer of Hebrews knows his congregation. He isn't speaking to the church in general or the world at large. He's addressing a specific community of Christians, a local assembly of believers with whom he has a deep and abiding relationship. So every message he delivers happens within the context of that relationship. The preacher in Hebrews doesn't speak with clinical detachment, keeping a safe distance from the folks in the pews, distributing theological data that they can then dispassionately analyze and draw their own conclusions. No, this preacher engages the hearers at multiple levels. He speaks to their hearts as well as their heads.

In order to do that, the preacher needs to know his listeners and their lives. He needs to be among the people, in the midst of their circumstances. He needs to be familiar with where they work, live, learn, shop, and play. He needs to be informed about and engaged with their joys and successes, and especially their sufferings and sorrows. If the preacher is going to connect with the congregants from the pulpit, he needs to be connected to them in their lives.

In the case of today's text from Hebrews, the preacher knows his people well enough to know that they're spiritually weary. Preacher Thomas Long captures the mood in this community of Christians when he says:

They are tired—tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.¹

In that kind of atmosphere, the preacher can't just stand at the pulpit and urge the congregants to reach deeper and try harder. He can't appeal to their own inner resources or their personal determination as a means of overcoming discipleship fatigue. Instead, he has to point the hearers to Jesus, the one who is both the source and the sustenance of their new life.

By this point in the sermon, the preacher has already told the congregation what kind of Savior it has. Particularly in chapter two, the preacher has reminded the hearers of how Jesus came in solidarity with the human condition. "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17). Jesus didn't try to rescue us while at the same time keeping a safe distance. He didn't stay in heaven and issue a decree of deliverance. Instead, he himself became the decree. He made the journey from heaven to earth, and from earth to heaven, in order to

redeem us. And those who are on the journey of faith need to know that they're on a path that Jesus has already created and traveled. By staying the course, in faithfulness and obedience, and through patient suffering, Jesus has defeated the devil and set us free from the fear of death. He's our representative before God, our advocate, interceding for all who are being put to the test.

One pastor tells about visiting a woman who was in the final stages of a battle with lung cancer. As she lay there in the hospital bed, gasping for breath, he could tell that the end of her struggle was near. In her hand she held a crucifix, the body of Christ nailed to the cross. Her grandmother had given it to her when she was a little girl. It had been carved by a monk somewhere in Europe. As she held the crucifix in her hand each day, it was a reminder of her Catholic faith. Wanting to do whatever he could to help her, the pastor said, "Would you like for me to pray with you? Would you like for me to summon a priest for you?" Clutching the crucifix, she replied, "Thank you, but I already have a priest."²

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (4:15). That last affirmation puts Jesus in a category all by himself. He was unwaveringly firm in his faithfulness to God. We ourselves are not. But we can count on him to go to God on our behalf. He gathers together what we offer him—our prayers, our cares, our hopes, our pain, our acts of repentance, our deepest needs and greatest trials—and brings all these offerings into the very presence of God. He intercedes for us. And he intercedes as one who knows what it's like. He knows human life from the inside, not from the outside. As one preacher has put it, "When Jesus talks to God about you, he knows of what he speaks."³

As your pastor, I know that there are things that only Jesus can do for you. Things that I can't. So a big part of my ministry is knowing when and where and how to point you to Jesus. But at the same time, I'm responsible for participating in Jesus' ministry to you and for you. That means being engaged with you and involved in your lives. It means being attentive to you and listening to you. It means being present to you. It means sharing in your joys and your sorrows. It means being familiar with your needs and your circumstances. It means knowing your hopes and your hurts, your successes and your sufferings. It means being interconnected and interdependent with you.

Two Sundays ago, you shared with me a kind card and a generous gift in honor of Pastor Appreciation Day. Doing so also gave me the opportunity to express my gratitude for each of you and for the ways that the love of Christ is evident in your lives and in your care for me and my family. Your act of support and generosity was a sign of the bond that we have formed as pastor and congregation during our years together

With time, and through mutual ministry, our lives become intertwined with one another. We enter more fully and deeply into one another's lives and experiences. In short, we grow in empathy. In other words, you're better able to imagine yourself in the situation of another person or a group of people. You put yourself in their shoes, so that to the extent that it's possible, you experience their perspective, their thoughts, and their feelings on the situation. Church is a community where we learn more about how to feel our way into other people's situations, and how to translate those feelings into concrete action that embodies the empathy of Jesus toward the world.

In the time leading up to the 2008 election, presidential candidate Barack Obama lamented the lack of empathy in our society. He said, "There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our *empathy deficit*—our ability to put

ourselves in someone else's shoes. . . . We live in a culture that discourages empathy, a culture that too often tells us that our principal goal in life is to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe and entertained."⁴ In today's cultural environment, empathy can easily give way to apathy. Instead of entering imaginatively and faithfully into the lives of others, we're tempted to withdraw from their experiences and callously wall ourselves off from their perspectives. This shows up in things like the tone of our political debates, our persistent racial and ethnic divisions, our sense of isolation from others, our greediness and consumption, our failure to give or receive help, and our inability to heal old wounds or restore broken relationships.

When it comes to our broken relationship with God, we can be thankful that God deals with us out of empathy not apathy. God's empathy for us is so great that it drove him to come to us in the flesh, in Jesus the Son, so that we could be reconciled to God. Rather than be emotionally disconnected from our sinfulness, alienation, and separation from himself, God entered into our condition, not only to feel our pain and experience our plight, but to bring us out of it and into a new situation where we can be made like Jesus in his spiritual perfection. The preacher in Hebrews reminds us that Jesus "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (7:25).

Remember that Jesus intercedes for you out of unwavering, unfailing empathy. And as he works to make you what he is, he always remembers being what you are. This truth is reflected in a story from Damien Spikereit, who tells about his experience of grief after his father's death. Damien was a new Christian at the time, and simply wanted to hear God speak into his sorrow. On the day of the funeral, the minister spoke, though Damien didn't remember what he said. Following the service, as friends filed past the family and offered words of condolence and encouragement, Damien was still waiting for God to speak. "Then," he says,

I saw Kim O'Quinn. She was my age. We were in the youth group together. When she got to me, she didn't say a word. She had tears in her eyes. And she simply hugged me and walked off. But I heard God speak. It dawned on me. Just months before, I had attended another funeral; the funeral for Kim O'Quinn's father. In that moment she knew exactly what it meant to be me.

He goes on, "If you want to hear God's voice in your life look no further than the one who knows exactly what it's like to be you."⁵

Though, as our text says, Jesus has "gone through the heavens" (v. 14), he also remains the one who came to this earth for our salvation. In order for us to draw near to God, he first drew near to us. Today, the bread and the cup on the Lord's Table remind us of the depths to which he went, the suffering he endured, and the obedience he displayed, so that we could be redeemed. And all because of a merciful and loving God whose empathy is demonstrated most fully in the cross.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*. Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 3.

² William H. Willimon, "You Need a Good Priest." *Preaching Today*. Audio cassette no. 106.

³ Willimon, "You Need a Good Priest."

⁴ Quoted in Lenny Luchetti, *Preaching with Empathy: Crafting Sermons in a Callous Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018) Kindle edition.

⁵ Damien Spikereit, in "The Story Before the Story." A sermon preached at Lincoln Christian College on November 25, 2003.