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Easter Imperatives: Empathy

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John 20:19-29

The last two weeks in the Hart-Andersen household have been significant. My mother-in-law, Carolyn Hendrix Hart, died on Wednesday, after ten days in hospice. She was 92 years old and had lived with us in our home for the last ten years.

Carolyn – as those who knew her will remember – was a down-to-earth, uncomplicated person, who got along with everyone. She lived with joy and laughter, even though she had known pain and loss in her life. She was not afraid of the end. She trusted the claim of the church: *in life and in death we belong to God*. Nothing more was needed beyond that affirmation.

Carolyn spent her last two weeks in what a friend came to call a “love fest.” She was with family, either in person or through the Internet. She was able to tell stories and share memories and offer and receive love, right to the last day, which came peacefully. It was – if one can say this about the end of life – a beautiful death.

In a traditional memorial service prayer there's a line that speaks of our "baptism as being complete in death." The promise of the unending grace of God, symbolized in the watery welcome into the church, is finally and fully realized when we die. In the words of the old hymn: "'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

In our journey through these last couple weeks our family was blessed by the circumstances. So many other older folks these days are confined and unable to see family – even if they're not sick. For those in nursing homes and hospitals and care centers, isolated and alone, for those whose loved ones have Covid-19 and cannot be with them, *our hearts break*.

Our hearts break. That phrase describes what happens when we grieve. There's been a lot of that in recent weeks, not only in our household, but in our community, across the land, and around the world. We may have thought we lived at a safe distance from suffering, but when it comes to the coronavirus there is no being apart from it, there is no American exceptionalism. We know the world's pain because we share it.

Our hearts break. The phrase describes an emotional response to another's affliction so strong that we bear it in our bodies. It becomes a shared experience – even if we ourselves are not actually in distress. The word we use for that sensation – when we understand someone else's pain so fully that we feel it ourselves and want to do something about it – is *empathy*, and it doesn't need to be solely on a personal level.

When we say, as we do in these days of distance, “We’re all in this together,” or when we greet strangers with a knowing nod, or when we applaud healthcare workers heading into the hospital, we are expressing empathy. When I was a boy I remember watching on TV in 1963, when President Kennedy said to West Germans surrounded by a new wall cutting them off from the world, “Ich bin ein Berliner,” those were empathetic words: *I am a Berliner*. Or on September 12, 2001, when the French newspaper *Le Monde* declared, “We are all Americans,” that was empathy in action.

The word *empathy* is a relative newcomer to the lexicon. About a hundred years ago English-speaking psychologists wanted to translate a new German word coined in the mid-19th century meaning “feeling-in.” It had been coined to describe the process by which someone viewing art feels drawn into the images they see. *Feeling-in*. The English-speakers wanted to borrow that phrase from the German, so they looked to the Greek language for help, where that phrase would be rendered “em-pathos” – *in-feeling* – and the word *empathy* came into usage.

Empathy has been defined variously as,

“Imagining how one would feel or think in another’s place; feeling distress at another’s suffering; feeling for another’s suffering, sometimes called pity or compassion; and projecting oneself into another’s situation.”

(C. Daniel Batson, quoted in

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/10/a-short-history-of-empathy/409912/>)

It's what Jesus did. He lived empathetically. He taught what we today would call *empathy* - "feeling distress at another's suffering." To follow Jesus means embracing that, embracing a relationship with others - including our enemies - based on empathy. Christianity is rooted in a theology of empathy. It's the entire point of the gospel. Incarnation is God's defining empathetic act, and the cross is the ultimate symbol of divine solidarity, divine empathy, with the human condition.

When Thomas the Twin says in the gospel story that he wants to see the wounds of Jesus and put his fingers into them, he's taking nothing for granted. Others gloss over the details of the death and focus on resurrection, but not Thomas. Thomas needs to experience the agony of crucifixion represented in those wounds, in order to fully grasp the meaning of the empty tomb. His empathy gives power to this Easter story.

He's called Doubting Thomas and has borne the brunt of negative type-casting for 2,000 years, but he deserves more credit. He understood what Jesus was up to on this earth. He's the only one who sees that entering into the suffering of others, actually feeling distress with their pain and trying to do something about it, is the faithful purpose of those who follow Jesus. He should be known as Empathetic Thomas.

The word *empathy* does not appear in our English translations of holy scripture, but the concept resides at the core of the biblical narrative. The Hebrew word that comes closest is *racham*, usually translated into English as *compassion*, from the Latin, *com-passion* – “feeling with.” The Bible repeatedly uses *compassion* – *feeling-with* – to describe the fundamental nature of God.

Racham also means *womb*. For the ancient Hebrews, the compassion of God was womb-like in its enclosing care. What could more closely demonstrate the “feeling-in” of empathy than a mother carrying a child within?

However we define it, empathy is essential to the creation of healthy human relationships, whether personal or in community. It’s at the core of a well-functioning democracy. A government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” requires a politics of empathy. We are *not* in this alone.

Five years ago, long before Covid-19, NYTimes writer Nicholas Kristof described what he called the “empathy gap” in America. He was referring to the increasing difficulty in this nation to have “feeling for another’s suffering” – especially if they were not of your own group.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-wheres-the-empathy.html#commentsContainer>)

It's only gotten worse.

Empathy is a casualty of American cultural polarity, of the cynical desire to politicize virtually everything, and of a deteriorating democracy being reduced to seeing only winners and losers. A political philosophy that cannot compromise begets a system that refuses to be empathetic, and we are close to that.

The response to a national crisis should start and end with empathy. Never mind who the victims of the coronavirus are; we are *all* victims.

In a video released this weekend, former President George W. Bush said, "We are not partisan combatants. We are human beings, equally vulnerable and equally wonderful in the sight of God."

<https://twitter.com/thebushcenter/status/1256607729151619073?s=12>

One of the things Covid-19 has revealed is how easily we fall into a calculated, selective empathy, where we withhold compassion based on our perception of worthiness. Meat-packing employees and restaurant workers, retail sales people, delivery drivers, nursing home attendants, and grocery cashiers, people with underlying conditions, or living in poor communities, or without immigration papers, are no less deserving of our compassion than anyone else.

“Empathy and simple kindness,” former President Bush said in his video, “Are essential and powerful tools of national recovery.”

Yet, we have a history in this land of restricting empathy and the help that comes with it only to those we perceive as meriting it. Think of the welcome and compassion offered to American GIs returning home triumphant from WWII – except African American troops who came home to Jim Crow laws that kept them out of homes and schools and denied their civil rights. Where was empathy there?

“Our suffering as a nation,” President Bush said, “Does not fall evenly.”

He’s right. With Covid-19,

“In Michigan, black people make up 14 percent of the population but 40 percent of the deaths. In Wisconsin, black people are 7 percent of the population but 33 percent of the deaths...In Mississippi, black people are 38 percent of the population but 61 percent of the deaths.” (“A Terrible Price; The Deadly Racial Disparities of Covid-19 in America,” NY Times, 4/29/20)

This “newly revealed disparity” is old news in the black community. W.E. B. Du Bois conducted a ground-breaking study on health among African Americans 120 years ago. His research documented a glaring lack of empathy in our land for the black

community. “The most difficult social problem in the matter of Negro health,” Du Bois wrote in 1899,

“Is the peculiar attitude of the nation toward the well-being of the race. There are few other cases in the history of civilized peoples where human suffering has been viewed with such peculiar indifference.” (“A Terrible Price,” NY Times, 4/29/20)

Peculiar indifference – the opposite of *unrestricted empathy*. If we’re not careful we will slip back toward national unconcern toward those most vulnerable, as we have over and over again in our history. Two weeks ago, Dr. Clyde Yancy echoed Du Bois. A black man who grew up in the segregated South, Dr. Yancy, a noted cardiologist, said of Covid-19 in America,

“These disparities are real, they are deep, and they are exacting a terrible price... If ever there were a moment to have a rallying cry, to have a call to action...there should be a moment of epiphany right now: This is not the way a civil society allows its population to exist.” (“A Terrible Price,” NY Times, 4/29/20)

This pandemic presents us with an opportunity to let go of the *peculiar indifference* we have shown in the past and develop new systems led by the empathetic impulses of the American people.

Those of us who follow Jesus have special concern for these matters. We are a resurrection community. We live in the tradition of Thomas. We go to the place of suffering, whether personal or collective, and enter it, and respond to it. We have a particular responsibility to speak up when our national empathy is lagging, or when our neighbor is hurting. Our faith expects that of us.

We saw empathy in action multiple times and in many ways as my mother-in-law Carolyn was nearing death: there were meals, cards, flowers, emails, and phone calls. One evening last week while at dinner I went to the front door and opened it to see about thirty Westminster members, all well-spaced apart, all with masks on, standing in the yard, across the sidewalk, and into the street. One of them had a guitar.

We brought Carolyn out and put her in a chair on the porch and listened as they sang. Only two songs. Less than ten minutes. We all cried for a moment. A prayer was offered through the tears. Then they yelled their love, hopped back in their cars, and headed home.

It was a Thomas-like act of empathy: to go to the point of pain and enter it, understand it, and even share it. That moment offered all of us a foretaste of the joy that awaited Carolyn.

That is the work of the church: to show compassion for others – those we love and those we don't even know – to show compassion individually and in community and even among the nations, to show compassion by living with unrestricted empathy.

That is an Easter imperative.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.