

“The Place of Empathy”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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When we convened here last September, there was much we did not know about the near future . . . such as who would win the November election or what the country would be like under new leadership. Nine months later, here we are. The new presidency is under significant strain amidst a series of disclosures—some within formal bodies of inquiry and others leaked by persons close to the source. We do not know the full picture surrounding various issues, nor do we know when *or if* we will ever know. The uncertainty is stressful for political leaders on both sides of the aisle as well as for those employed by the government or dependent on government resources.

The tensions around us seem high. I can feel irritability and, yes, even fear simmering within myself. How about you? What do you notice? How are you feeling?

Yet, it is not just tension and uncertainty that swirl within and around us. It is also rage and hatred, incivility and rudeness. The country is divided, the pundits say. “What is even true anymore?”, some wonder. We live in bubbles, it’s said. We don’t understand what it’s like to be a white Christian evangelical man in the Midwest or a white woman in coal country with kids that have no job options. *But*, some counter, *‘they’* don’t know what it’s like to live in a multicultural city like Boston or New York or San Francisco. The problem, some say, is that we just don’t understand each other. We need more empathy. We need to stand in each other’s shoes. We need to feel what they are feeling.

Is empathy what we need right now? Would more empathy solve the divisiveness, the hatred, the injustice?

I began thinking about empathy last summer after a friend, Nate Walker, published a book, *Cultivating Empathy*. The introduction of the book begins with this story:

Over a period of several months in 1960 in New Orleans, child psychologist Robert Coles spoke with Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old African American who was threatened and taunted by people who opposed her enrollment in a segregated school.

She told Coles she felt sorry for the people who were trying to kill her.

He clarified, “You feel sorry for them?”

“Well, don’t you think they need feeling sorry for?” she asked.ⁱ

Walker uses this story to introduce the idea of *moral imagination* which he defines as “the ability to anticipate or project oneself into the middle of a moral dilemma or conflict and understand all points of views.” As Walker explains, Ruby Bridges was able to “imagine the torturous existence the segregationist white supremacist experienced when threatening her life.”ⁱⁱ

This story and Walker’s treatment of it as an example of moral imagination are a great example of a way that empathy *can* lead to a moral path of action. By imagining the experience of those who tortured her, Ruby was able to show them compassion, to offer forgiveness, and to pray for them. Really rather humbling.

Indeed, empathy is a tool that can soften our criticism of another as we try to see the world from another’s point of view. We often value those who are able to show empathy. Those with zero empathy for others are condemned as cold-hearted psychopaths. And so, I expected to be championing empathy in this sermon. Certainly a Unitarian Universalist minister trying to live by the principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person would value showing empathy, right?!

Thus, I approached Paul Bloom’s book *Against Empathy* with some skepticism.ⁱⁱⁱ Bloom acknowledges from the beginning that writing a book *against* empathy is unpopular. [As someone who wrote a dissertation critiquing the idea of *home*, I have great sympathy for his plight!] Bloom does have some good things to say about empathy. In the concluding pages, he writes: “empathy can motivate kindness to individuals that makes the world better” and that “empathy can be an immense source of pleasure”—such as when empathizing with our children allows us to experience certain pleasures of life as if for the first time. But, for Bloom, empathy has its problems and in the end those negatives outweigh the positives.^{iv}

He argues that empathy acts like a spotlight by narrowly focusing our attention. Defining empathy as “feeling another’s feelings,” he suggests that we simply are not capable of feeling *everyone’s* feelings. Empathy isn’t broad; empathy is narrow. Empathy focuses on one person or small groups of persons. We can’t empathize with statistics, nor with a theoretical future. Empathy is turning our emotional attention here and now to a narrow focus.

Sometimes such narrow empathy is good...such as when you’re a parent empathizing with your child or a spouse empathizing with your partner. Bloom even notes that empathy may have developed for this purpose of bonding with our children and/or our kinship group.

So where is the problem? As a psychologist, Bloom's book includes examples drawn from research experiments. For example, in one experiment participants were told about a medical support program for terminally ill children. The participants were then asked to listen to an interview with a child on the waiting list for the program. Some participants were told to "try to take an objective perspective toward what is described" while other participants were told "try to imagine how the child who is interviewed feels about what has happened." Three-quarters of those were cued to be empathic, to feel as the child feels, voted to move this child up the waiting list, while only one-third in the 'objective' group voted to move the child up the list. The problem here is the other children on the list. Is moving this one child a fair and equitable process? Bloom suggests that empathy may have made the process *less just* by favoring one child over the others.^v

Bloom questions whether empathy on its own is always a reliable moral compass to lead us to the good. Consider the impact of fiction to create empathy. A story can make the plight of characters come alive, cultivate empathy, inspire the moral imagination, and motivate action in the real world. Yet, this capacity of empathy is itself morally neutral. On this point Bloom quotes Joshua Landy who writes,

For every *Uncle Tom's Cabin* there is a *Birth of a Nation*. For every *Bleak House* there is an *Atlas Shrugged*. For every *Color Purple* there is a *Turner Diaries*, that white supremacist novel Timothy McVeigh left in his truck on the way to bombing the Oklahoma building. Every single one of these fictions play on its readers' empathy.^{vi}

Rather than determining a particular direction of action, empathy acts as a morally neutral tool. Where we train the spotlight of our empathy makes a big difference.

This spotlight image is helpful as we consider Bloom's other major concern with empathy. Empathy, he suggests, is subject to bias. He writes, "In general, we care most about people who are similar to us—in attitude, in language, in appearance—and we will always care most of all about events that pertain to us and people we love."^{vii} When the bias of empathy to care most for those like us combines with the spotlight effect, the danger is that our empathic attention remains focused on those most similar to us. This insight helped me to understand why it is our nation responds in a big way to bombings in Paris or stabbings in London while mass deaths in Syria or Turkey do not generate comparable Facebook posts or headlines.

By using the spotlight image, Bloom tries to make clear that empathy not only has benefits for those that receive attention, but it also has costs for those whose plight is left in the shadows. In other words, empathy may not be the best tool for guiding moral action that is

just and fair to all . . . especially to those who are different than ourselves, whose lives and experiences may fall outside the spotlight of our empathic attention.

And this brings us back to the political divisiveness in our nation and elsewhere. The truth is that there are real differences of experiences, philosophies, and values among people. The truth is that some of these differences lead to conflict. For many, the election refocused their attention to different groups of people—to people whose choices, as well as the motivations and experiences underlying those choices, felt foreign. Many of us asked, can we feel what they feel? Can we have empathy for the Trump voter? For Trump himself?

Is empathy *the* answer to bridge social divides? Bloom says no. Instead of empathy, he argues that compassion and reason would work better. Although compassion and empathy are both emotional states of response to another person's emotions, they are not the same. Psychologists Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki explain, "In contrast to empathy, compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as strong motivation to improve the other's well-being." This difference between empathy and compassion can actually be seen in brain scans. The studies showed how meditating with compassionate thoughts generated pleasant feelings of well-being towards others, while placing oneself in an empathic state drew energy as a person imagined feeling what another felt.

This is *not* to say that empathy has no role—sometimes we gladly spend the energy to feel the sorrow or joy of one whom we love. And yet, it does suggest that empathy may not be the best frame for engaging with large, persistent social problems such as those currently facing the nation. Empathy may be too narrow, too biased, and too draining to attempt on large groups of people whom we do not really know.

Instead of empathy, perhaps sometimes what we need is compassion for the plight of others—feeling *for* the struggle of living in a community without adequate economic opportunities, feeling *for* the difficulty of relating to people with different color skin, religion, or nationality when all you've ever known are people like you. Such compassion recognizes the worth and dignity of every person and seeks their well-being, but it does not try to make their feelings our own feelings.

Such compassion is a more abstract recognition of others and therefore a broader and less biased posture towards others. This mental ability of abstraction of values and worth and dignity points to the importance of reason in moral deliberation. Bloom writes,

“Our attitudes about the rights of women, homosexuals, and racial minorities have all shifted towards inclusiveness. ... But this is not because our hearts have opened up over the course of history. We are not more empathic than our great-grandparents. We don’t really think of humanity as our family and we never will. Rather, our concern for others reflects a more abstract appreciation that regardless of our feelings, their lives have the same value as those we love.”^{viii}

In other words, as rational persons we have the capacity to choose to be compassionate by recognizing the worth and dignity of strangers...or friends. Perhaps empathy may be a tool to help us understand another, but it is not the ultimate moral compass towards right action.

I should say that I don’t agree with everything in Bloom’s book. But, that would be another sermon. But I do think it’s important to recognize that the place of empathy may be with those closest to us. Even then, we sometimes need to know the difference between taking on the suffering of another as our own and having compassion for the struggle someone we care about is facing.

As far as the political divides in the country go, I don’t think anyone has *the* answer to ‘solving’ the problem. What I do know is that there are differences among us and that these differences cause very real conflict and consequences. I also know that believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every person means I must resist dehumanizing those with whom I disagree. I like the wise model of Ruby Bridges. I can try to imagine the point of view of those with whom I disagree, who would even wish me or those I love harm. While I may “feel sorry for them” or have compassion for the plight that underlies their beliefs and actions, I can still keep on the path that I believe is right. Ruby Bridges kept walking through those hateful crowds and into school. So too we can strive to resist dehumanizing those with whom we disagree, trying to compassionately understand their point of view, even as we strive to what our moral reason tells us is right.

So may we have compassion for others. Even in our differences. Even in our conflicts.
So may it be.

Amen.

ⁱ Nathan C. Walker, *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person—Without Exception*, (Boston: Skinner House, 2016), xvii.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 240-241.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 86.

^{vi} p.49

^{vii} p.91

^{viii} p.239