

The “sin” of Empathy

Friedman always gave the disclaimer that 70% of his ideas were true.

I'm riding at about 50% in this talk and so that means 7 ½ minutes of this will be gold dust!

Empathy has crept into the room, like a relative you never knew you had, but who has now moved into the spare bedroom and insists on calling all the shots.

Empathy is the ninja throwing star of choice for arguments, conflicts and disagreements. If you're accused of a lack of empathy - you're probably out of the game and you probably never saw it coming.

Empathy is the new playground game for adults, whoever claims they have the most of it is the hero and the other the villain.

But **empathy** is a relatively new idea.

1931 Oxford English Dictionary doesn't even list it as a word.

It came into common usage after WW2, **and whereas 'compassion' meant feeling with someone.**

- That is recognising and acknowledging the pain of others.
- Appreciating the perspective of others, even if it is different to your own.

'**Empathy**' means '**feeling in**' someone.

- That is the process of so identifying with the predicament and pain of another that their pain becomes your pain.
- The boundaries between their situation and yours merge, you demonstrate your connection with them by adopting their emotional state as your own.

Compassion 'feeling with' - is like a paramedic. It is vital they acknowledge the precise pain of another, but their ability to help the person depends upon clear boundaries of not being the other person.

Empathy 'feeling in' - Is like finding someone distraught because they've fallen in a pit and so you demonstrate your connection with the person, by jumping into the pit with them. The bond of closeness is forged but the result is two people are now stuck in a pit.

For Friedman Empathy is often anxiety in disguise.

And the problem with empathy is that it looks like a loving posture towards another but in reality it is often a self protection mechanism that doesn't help anyone.

Winston Churchill famously summarised the cause of the WW2 being:

“The malice of the wicked was reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous.”

Hear this clearly, it is not that we shouldn't feel emotional pain when interacting with those who are hurting, but crucially we need to keep a clear distinction between:

- Their situation and ours.
- What God is teaching them (perhaps through pain) and what different thing God might be teaching us.
- Their response which is the accumulated response of years of specific experiences and your own distinct response to the situation based on your own experience and maturity.
- The realisation that my different perspective is vital because it can be lovingly applied to help them.

Because the big thing you need in times of crisis is perspective and the first thing that empathy reduces is perspective.

Why this matters is because: **the most anxious person in the room is the most powerful.**

And that is particularly true in our churches.

That sounds counterintuitive because someone who is anxious or distressed is superficially perceived to be vulnerable and marginalised, but communities driven by 'empathy' *make the anxious king!*

Think about it.

We're so driven by a belief that to love someone is **always to reduce their pain**, that we will bend over backwards to appease those on our committees, elderships and congregations in order to shrink their anxiety.

So our empathy saturated culture, will assume we're doing the '*Christian thing*' when we:

- Delay
- Cancel
- Avoid

decisions that increase the anxiety of others.

We will be tempted to dance on egg shells for our entire ministry life, and say “we did it in love”, even if that means we steer our churches into slow, but polite, decline.

I’m involved in training and coordinating Gospel Coaches for ministers across multiple networks and denominations across the UK and the picture is tragically the same:

Leaders are facing a world where they need to change the way they do ministry, but they face a culture where change creates anxiety *and* therefore the danger of being accused of being abusive- so they don’t know what to do!

Do you remember the wrist bands: ‘What would Jesus do?’

Everyone claims their position is the one that Jesus would take.

Of course the question is which aspect of Jesus’s example are we talking about?

- The Jesus who meets the anxiety of the Rich young ruler who is desperate to be affirmed, but resists shrinking his pain by challenging him?
- Or the Jesus who meets Jairus with the anxiety of a sick child, but resists shrinking his pain by pausing the journey to heal another?
- Or even the Jesus who responds to Peter’s anxiety at the news of the forecast death of his friend - by resisting shrinking his pain, saying: “Get behind me Satan”.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Friedman’s work, that we are least able to hear is this:

The fault of the leadership or decision making paralysis that we find ourselves in, does not only lie with the anxious elder or church member. Rather Friedman argued that it lies with you - *the pastor who who didn’t have the courage to choose compassion over empathy.*

Or me the pastor who chose the self protection of popularity, over progress in the gospel going out.

Friedman loved the parallel with immunology.

The idea that just as a virus is dependent on a healthy cell to host it, a leader **allows** themselves to be hijacked by not building a healthy immune system.

What we say in Gospel Coaching, is **the application of the gospel is the best way for a leader to build a healthy immune system.**

For if it is the idols of security, comfort and success that erode a leaders immune system,

(Of expressed as “My functional justification can’t afford for you to leave my church.”)

Only the gospel can heal it.

So let me leave you with this question:

What situation are you in, where loving your church well, will require you to have a stronger immune system?