

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for November 9, 2008
Lessons: Psalm 113 and Mark 10:17-22

THE PUZZLE I, THE MYSTERY YOU

The week before the election, two men my age were discussing their economic considerations in making the choice. Realize, though, that were “talking” by e-mail on an Internet message board, not face to face. One danger of online communication comes from just that fact: people cannot see each other’s faces. Without that physical connection, the face-to-face relation of one human to another, people slip into manners of speech they would be unlikely to use if the other person were in the same room. So, frustrated and feeling out-argued, one man pasted a label onto the other and then dismissed him as irrelevant.

What do I mean by saying he “pasted a label” onto the other man? The two are in different lines of work, and their views on money matters differ significantly. He declared the other man’s experience of life unrealistic, his viewpoint invalid, then dismissed him as effectively a spouter of eloquent nonsense. People do not like to be labeled as types. We want to be recognized as persons. Of course, that week before the election was tense, and we could just say the combination of heated politics and the e-mail factor caused the problem, but in the course of that conversation, a question was raised about the life we share in this world, with or without computers. Can we ever really understand each other?

When you are going through a crisis or grief over a major loss in life, you may hear well-meaning people try to support you by saying, “I understand what you’re going through” or “what you’re feeling.” If you believe the other person’s experiences in life validate that claim to understanding, you may welcome the support, at least until you hear the word “but.” If that word comes, followed by some prescription for putting your distress or grief behind you, then you are quite likely to hear in your mind (if not from your lips) the reply, “No, you don’t understand what I’m feeling or what I’m going through. You don’t understand me at all.” That little word, “but,” spoils the attempt at understanding because, however well-intentioned or wise the advice that follows, it signals dismissal of your feelings. It says, in effect, “You shouldn’t let yourself feel as you do. You need to get over it.”

Do we, can we, understand each other? There is a philosophical position which contends we do not and, indeed, cannot. It’s called solipsism, and the solipsist says each of us has her own or his own isolated reality that others cannot share. There is no true common ground. You see life your way, and I see it my way, and there is no solution possible.

Before we dismiss the solipsist as a grouch, let's think a moment about the experience of isolation and let the feeling of loneliness speak. *No one understands me. Some think they do, but they really don't get it. How could they, when I'm not at all sure I understand myself? Someone told me God understands what I'm feeling, knows what I'm going through. Really? How exactly does the Almighty understand me when I feel so powerless? Just how does the All-knowing know how it feels to be as confused as I am right now? Is God's life falling apart like mine? Does God have this sick feeling in the stomach? Does God hate waking up to face another day? What does God know about grief, about its empty ache, its anger, its lost feeling?* Actually, God knows more about all those feelings than we might imagine, but let's go on with samples of the questions of human isolation and loneliness.

Has God had a love fall apart, lost a job, flunked out of school, bombed a test, been teased day after day? Has a boss belittled God in front of coworkers? Do people click down their car door locks when God walks by, for fear of the color of God's face? Has God ever had to stand in line at the welfare office or the food distribution center? Is God behind with the mortgage and the electric bill? Does God have arthritis? Does God have a child hanging with the wrong crowd? Does God ever have to pretend to be strong while feeling very weak?

Psalm 113 carefully pictures the LORD God, not just up in the heavens but high above them, meaning God is above everyone and everything. No one, however high and mighty on earth, comes any closer to God's level than anyone else. The message, though, is that God who is higher than everyone, sees and cares for the one who is put down.

We could easily misunderstand the psalm. We could picture God as the supreme ruler who favors the disadvantaged but only to keep us straight about who has the power. Be arrogant, and you'll be slapped down by God. Be meek, and God may lift you up a notch or two to remind the more powerful on earth that they too are really nothing. That view of God and God's ego is not very helpful. The Olympian gods of Greek mythology grew jealous of human success or glory, but our God is not in competition with us and does not envy the successful person. God desires what is better for every person, even though what I think would be better for me may not be what God sees as my need.

Mark shares a very important observation on Jesus' encounter with the rich man. Mark tells us, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him . . ." What does that remark mean? Jesus is about to ask the man to give up his wealth and become a disciple, but we need to know Jesus does not stereotype the man and then dismiss him on the basis of a label that reads, "just another rich man." Jesus is not rejecting a type of person but calling a particular individual to leave behind an old way of life the man has made clear dissatisfies him and take the new walk of discipleship and service. At first in their conversation, it probably seemed the man wanted only to add eternal life to the good life he already had, but when Jesus directs

him to the commandments of God for living in response to God's grace as one of God's people, the man says he has lived that way since his youth but still senses something missing. He is not self-satisfied and concerned only that death will finally take the good life from him. No, he is dissatisfied with his well-appointed life, and Jesus' response to him becomes quite personal. That Jesus loves him means the man's rejection of the call, his inability to detach himself from his many possessions, hurts Jesus, too. Jesus has let himself care about this man, and so it hurts when the man turns back.

When the Bible says God "knows" our conditions of life and our feelings, it means God not only understands them but feels them with us. God's love is empathic; it is a sharing. God feels what makes a person drink too much or do something else self-destructive. Does God know how I feel? Yes. Jesus is the living embodiment of that "Yes," of God's empathy; that's what the Incarnation means, God's entry into our life of flesh and blood with all our limitations and weaknesses. God does understand us, and not to judge but to care, not to scorn us and send us away but to be with us in our distress.

Because God's love is empathic (caring), not dismissive (judgmental), we can learn to understand each other well enough to reach across barriers and help each other out of isolation and loneliness. No, I will never be able to read you like a book, but that's a good thing. I will not because you are not a type but a unique, individual person. Sure, we have enough in common to be able to recognize each other's feelings. When I smile a real smile, you see I am happy or satisfied, feeling enjoyment. We can see when another person is angry, tense, or distressed. Thank God we have these affects that show on our faces and in our body language so we can "read" each other well enough to understand and empathize. Imagine how confusing it would be if these basic affects were not the same for all of us, if I smiled when I was sad or frowned to show I was pleased. God has made us enough alike to be able to understand each other and be moved to the shared feelings of empathy. But there is also a protective distance between us that preserves the uniqueness and integrity of the individual. So, thank God, we are not identical, not stereotypes, but distinct individuals who think and feel in our own ways, from different viewpoints. Because we are both alike and different, we can get to know each other as persons, not types. If we stop pasting labels on people, we can learn to know as God knows, at least a little. Then, we can help each other out of isolation but not violate the other person's distinctiveness as a person. Then, we can more truly be Christ's church, walking together with him, and maybe we can even help people come together in a society that very much needs to come together and may have the opportunity right now to get started. Amen.