

Fostering Empathy

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

2 August 2026

Children's Talk: Getting Your Way

Is getting things your way wrong? We often talk about needing to be ok with not always getting your way, or making sure to not force other people to do things your way. You want to do things one way, but mom and dad make you do them their way. A lot of life is spent not doing things your way.

You get told not to do things our way so often that you might start to think that getting your way is somehow wrong, or bad. That somehow you are wrong or bad. But that's not what the Lord wants us to think. Yes, He does want us to think of other people first and do kind things for them. But He's also put something good into your heart, something that no one else has.

The Lord showed this with a prophet named Jeremiah. The Lord told Jeremiah that,

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;
Before you were born I made you holy;
I made you a prophet to the nations. (Jeremiah 1:5)

Before Jeremiah had even been born, the Lord had a plan for him. And indeed, the Lord called Jeremiah to be a prophet, to tell people about the Lord, and how to stop doing evil things and start doing good things. Jeremiah did something that no one else could have done. In a sense, Jeremiah had to get his way: if he had said, "I'm just going to do things the way everyone else does them," he would not have carried out the special plan the Lord had for him.

You are the same as Jeremiah. Before you were even born, the Lord had decided that you were going to be special. You were going to be someone that no one else could be, and do things that no one else could do.

That doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. You can't hit your friend because you're mad at him. But it does mean that sometimes you'll be the only one

who thinks a certain way, and that will actually be a good thing. It does mean that sometimes you will want things to go a certain way, and even though no one else does, it will be good and right for you to want to get your way then.

The Lord uses the example of a light to show how we are supposed to share the unique things He has given us:

Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:15-16)

Now this isn't a lamp like they would have had, but you might be more familiar with something like this. Imagine the power goes out in the evening, and so you turn on the lamp. But then you think, "hmmm, the light might bother some people, I'm going to put it under a bucket." The light is still shining, but can it help anyone? No! It is hidden.

Likewise, sometimes we will disagree with people, or bother them, or feel like we have nothing to offer. But if we have something from the Lord, the point is to let it shine! Don't hide what you have been given by the Lord. Don't be ashamed to get your way, if your way is the right one or the good one. Let your light shine.

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In any relationship there is a sense in which multiple people become one. We think of this most clearly in the case of marriage: we even have the phrase, “the two shall become one flesh.” But it is also true more broadly: any partnership of individuals, be it friendship, work-related, or social, is a matter of individual people becoming one by working towards common goals. In this process one of the key elements is learning not just to think what other people are thinking, but to feel what they feel and even intend what they intend. In short, empathy is part of what will unite a relationship of individual people.

Now we will get to how we create that deep oneness with each other in a bit, but I want to start on the grandest scale possible. That is, with God. One of the central goals of God’s love is oneness with people (*True Christian Religion* §43). This is the work of eternity: good people and angels are forever working towards a closer oneness with God. But just wanting to be one with someone is not the same as empathy. God’s experience of life is vastly, incomprehensibly different from our own. Or at least, it would seem that way, with one exception: the incarnation, or the birth of God Himself in Human form onto Earth, to live and die and rise again. Jesus’ life on Earth is the epitome of empathy: it was God’s way of walking in our shoes, suffering what we suffer, undergoing what we undergo, feeling what we feel, facing every hardship that we face. The prophet Isaiah says of Jesus,

Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Isn't it true that when we find out that someone has suffered something we have suffered, we instantly feel a connection with them? Well the Lord, God Himself, has suffered everything and anything we could ever suffer. When God feels distant, remember this. He has lived your suffering, He knows your pain, and wants more than anything to be connected with you.

What God has done for us on a grand scale we do on an individual scale. This is perhaps best summed up in the familiar command, "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). As with many familiar phrases, I don't often think too much about the deeper implications. With this one, I often interpret it simply as, "love people a lot." But of course that's not exactly it: love people "as yourself;" as if they were you; as if their pain was your pain and their joy was your joy. This kind of love is the pathway to becoming one with other people. The Teachings of the New Church lay out these implications clearly:

The essence of love and charity is to make two people so to speak into one. When one person loves another as himself, and more than himself, he sees the other in himself, and himself in the other. This anyone can appreciate if only he will direct his attention to what love is, or to persons who love one another mutually. The will of the one is that of the other; they are as it were inwardly joined together, and are separate from each other in body only. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1013)

I was struck especially by the phrase, "When one person loves another as himself, and more than himself, he sees the other in himself, and himself in the other." There does seem to be a deepening of love when you recognize yourself in another person's story. Ironically, I think most of us are afraid of sharing our flaws because we think it will push people away; and yet the majority of the time when I hear someone else's mistakes and hurts, my love for them only increases. When we empathize we truly can love others as ourselves.

Some people naturally seem to fall into this kind of empathizing, but for others it is more difficult. It takes conscious work, as much as we might like it to just happen. So how do you get there? A good start would be trying to see ourselves in the other person's position. How would we feel if we were them? What would we be thinking? What would our reactions be? I think here it is important that we not stop at the external, but keep going to the internal. In other words, it's not just a matter of relating to their external circumstances, but to the heart of the matter. I may not have had the exact same experience as someone else, but there's a good chance that I've thought and felt something along the same lines as them, even if in different circumstances. Just to give a brief example, I don't know what it's like to have a drug addiction. But I do know what it's like to have a hard to break habit, to hate myself for who am, to be embarrassed for others to find out something about me, and to struggle mightily to change. If I imagine these realities, and then imagine them amplified, I can get much closer to seeing myself in a drug addict, and so be able to empathize and connect with them.

At the same time, there is an interesting paradox in all this: although the goal is to become one with others, we can only do that when we recognize our distinctions and don't lose ourselves in the other person. When lines are blurred, ironically, there is less possibility of union and connection. The Teachings of the New Church apply this to many situations. They say that the more closely someone is joined to the Lord, the more clearly he feels as if he is independent (*Divine Providence* §42). The more distinct each individual angel is, the more he contributes to the unity and wholeness of his society (*Divine Providence* §4:4). The more goodness is kept distinct from truth, the more easily the two can be welded into one (*Divine Providence* §4:4). And of course, the more two partners in a relationship

maintain certain distinctions, the more able they are to work as one (*Marriage Love* §200). When there is confusion about wants, needs, roles, and so on, disunion is the result. An illustration of this is a painting: when the colours are distinct, they work together to create a beautiful whole; but when the colours are blurred it loses all definition and beauty.

I think we can see why this is by looking at some examples of relationships. Take a young couple just starting to date. They spend the day together in the city and now are deciding whether to stay longer or call it a day. And she clearly wants to do whatever he wants to do; but he of course wants to do whichever one she preferred. So they get stuck in a bizarre feedback loop of each trying to make the choice each thought the other one wanted for themselves. It sounds “selfless,” but it’s not particularly healthy. Neither of them will likely be satisfied with the results. The same is true in a marriage. When a husband and wife become confused about who’s who, it causes division, not unity. Take a young, newly married couple, who knows that they are supposed to be becoming one. And so they try to anticipate what the other thinks and feels, and put aside completely their own wants and needs. When their first fight comes up, they each bend over backward to accommodate the other without expressing themselves in any way that might contradict what the other desires. You can imagine what a mess this situation would make. Underlying the apparent unity would be uncertainty, confusion, dissatisfaction, resentment, and above all, disconnect.

Contrast that with a couple that have been married a little longer. They too know that they are to become one. But instead of confusing who’s who, they hash things out openly. Each is clear about his or her own wants and needs, even as he or she listens to and affirms the other. They consciously compromise and establish

boundaries. Through their conversations, and even arguments, they create something that works for each of them. What looks like division at first allows for true partnership. Each knows where the other stands, trusts that they have been heard, and clearly sees where the relationship is going. There can be true unity because even though each partner was looking out for the good of the other, they did not become confused about who was who. They remained distinct individuals, which, counterintuitively, allowed them to unite more closely as one married couple.

Everything I've said so far assumes the case where all the people involved have as their goal unity and charity. Sadly, that is not always the case. But even then, it is still possible to empathize with people who are opposed to us and even committing evil. One key is that in these cases maintaining distinction becomes even more important than ever before. Empathizing with the evil does not mean empathizing with their evil, but rather with the harm that it cause. Consider Jesus' reaction to the city that would shortly condemn and crucify Him:

Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:41-44)

Jesus both sees the state of evil but can at the same time feel immense sorrow for the consequences. He empathizes with the person, and the hurt done to them by their own choices, even as He condemns those choices. Likewise, when He condemned the behaviour of the scribes and Pharisees, He began each condemnation with the word "woe:" "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees!" (Matthew 23) In translation it loses some of its punch, since we really don't say "woe" anymore. But basically it means alas! It's an expression of sorrow, sorrow over the

unhappiness and calamity that the evil bring on themselves (*Apocalypse Revealed* §416).

This distinction between empathizing with a person's mistakes without excusing said mistakes is hard to balance. Nor is the answer always clear. There may be times when someone simply needs to be heard and loved and nothing more. There may be other times that you need to walk away in order to maintain a healthy distinction between your own issues and the other person's. Jesus both ate and drank with sinners, and also told His disciples to depart from anywhere that would not accept His words. It is hard to separate from a person we care about, because it represents disconnection from the parts of them that we do value. If nothing else, however, we can take comfort in this: the Lord does not love that person any less than He loves us. As Jesus Himself said,

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:44-45)

The Lord sends His blessings on the good and the evil alike. No matter how far someone has separated themselves from the Lord, His desire to be joined to them and to bless them never ceases.

In the end, each and every relationship requires at least two people to function: two separate, independent, individuals, each of whom is clear where he ends and the other begins. The more we understand ourselves in light of that fact, the more we will be able to join with others and become one with them: with the Lord, with friends and family, with husbands and wives, with children and parents, and the whole of the Lord's Kingdom. As individuals, we can all become one in Him.