

A Message from our Pastor

Rev. Philip D. Reifenberg



January 3, 2021

Dear Parishioners,

I came across a powerful description of empathy recently:

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is looking across at someone and feeling sorrow, often in times of loss. Empathy is not pity. Pity is looking down from above and feeling a distant sadness for another in their misfortune. Empathy is commonly viewed as putting yourself in someone else's shoes and imagining how you would feel. That could be seen as a start, but that is little more than role-playing, and it is not enough in the ruptured world we live in.

Radical empathy, on the other hand, means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it. . . .

With our current ruptures, it is not enough to not be racist or sexist. Our times call for being pro-African-American, pro-woman, pro-Latino, pro-Asian, pro-indigenous, pro-humanity in all its manifestations. In our era, it is not enough to be tolerant. You tolerate mosquitoes in the summer, a rattle in an engine, the gray slush that collects at the crosswalk in winter. You tolerate what you would rather not have to deal with and wish would go away. It is no honor to be tolerated. Every spiritual tradition says love your neighbor as yourself, not tolerate them.

These words were written by Isabel Wilkerson and appear in the Epilogue of her recently [2020] published work, Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents. I came across this wonderfully written but disturbing book after reading Father Bryan Massingale's 2010 book, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church, which is the subject of a discussion group organized and led by Paige Katzfey. (Without going into a lot of detail, this discussion group is an outgrowth of last June's "Open Wide Our Hearts" novena sponsored by SJB in response to the Black Lives Matter protests that were rocking our nation following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Father Massingale is an African American priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee who currently teaches moral theology at Fordham University in New York City.)

The discussion group's next session is Monday, January 4th, at 7:15 p.m. on Zoom. If you are interested in participating (or just listening in), please call or contact Paige at SJB (892-4006) or on-line at pkatzfey@sjbplymouth.org. I extend this invitation as an echo of Isabel Wilkerson's challenge of "putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart."

Hope to see you on Zoom.

Fr. Phil