

A Call for Empathy

“Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.” (from Psalm 31 NRSV)

Who among us cannot recall a time in our lives when we felt as the psalmist writes above? As our nation debates and passes laws aimed to either further marginalize our transgender siblings I can't help but imagine these words find resonance in their experience of coming to terms with their gender identity and the experience of being talked about in the public square. Such times call for empathy.

While some states have passed or expanded public accommodations laws to include, among other things, allowing transgender people to use bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity, many more continue to make headlines for debating and passing laws that limit or roll back the civil rights of transgender persons based on misunderstanding, misinformation, and plain old fear-mongering.

As a religious leader, I'm particularly disturbed by words spoken and actions taken by some people of faith in support of legislation to restrict the civil rights of transgender persons. One pastor I heard in an interview on the radio claimed a person's gender is not determined by how one feels but is determined by one's anatomy. This claim is easily debunked by any number of resources, including faith based resources, on human sexuality such as Our Whole Lives (OWL) which recognize gender as complex and inclusive of not only biological sex, but also gender identity and expression.

Even more disturbing to me than the pastor's willful ignorance was his utter lack of compassion toward those of whom he spoke with such forceful certitude. He seemed to be more interested in defending his understanding of God than in understanding God's children.

Although not all religions are the same, many share a similar overarching message which may be summarized as: Get your ego out of the way and cultivate compassion.

And this brings me back to empathy. Empathy or “putting oneself in another's shoes” so that we might understand or imagine how another feels is the gateway to compassion. Compassion is not only feeling what another feels, but staying with and accepting it, which in turn motivates and allows us to respond to a person from a place of understanding and acceptance rather than our own ego or self-interest.

Ego is habit. Compassion takes practice. Compassion is also more risky, for if we keep at it, we will surely be changed. And isn't that the point of religion?

Peace and blessings,

Rev. Craig