



# Pinewood Lutheran Church

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Remember Counselor Troi, the empathic counselor on "Star Trek: The Next Generation."? She had the ability to read people and gain insight into their innermost thoughts and emotions which helped Captain Picard out of more than a few jams. Having such abilities is intriguing. It is also something all Christians should try to attain and/or cultivate. The dictionary definition of empathy is this: "Understanding so intimate that the feelings, thoughts, and motives of one person are readily comprehended by another." Can you imagine the deep and lasting relationships people would possess if everyone had such empathy? Can you imagine the violence and distrust that could be averted? Some might say that empathy like this is just "Science Fiction." It will never happen. But, is it?

The greatest empath in all history is none other than Jesus Christ. As the Son of God He could read minds and hearts. As true Man He also could relate exactly to the emotions and motives of those He interacted with. When Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb, He literally felt the pain of all present. When He "sweat those drops of blood" in Gethsemane, He was experiencing the pain and anguish of the entire world's population when it came to the "wages of sin" which is death. Godly empathy is the reason that Jesus always had just the right words to say at exactly the proper time. It's one of the reasons He could heal hurting hearts with comforting words or just His comforting presence.

The Christian Church, all of you, are inseparably joined to Christ by His sacrifice in your place on the cross. His shedding of blood to save you is what bonds you to Him. Faith is the "tie that binds" us to Him. Likewise, it is no mistake that in the Bible God likens the Church's union with Christ unto Christian marriage. He is the Bridegroom and we are His Bride. For empathy is one of the bedrocks of a blessed marriage.

I know that people get married because "they love each other." (Often that love is tinged with a lot of lust, but that's a discussion for another time.) The point is: once you get beyond infatuation and togetherness, empathy needs to come to the fore. Over time, in marriage, each spouse places themselves into each other's shoes. You begin to know, instinctively, what the other person is thinking, what's on their minds, even to the point of finishing each other's sentences. You immerse yourself into the life of the one you love. If you have previously kept secrets, they are no longer secrets because your beloved spouse senses and knows what's wrong **and** you're happy to share it with them! This is also a form of self-denial. You deny yourself and your agenda in favor of your loved one's needs. You don't always talk **at** them to get what you want because you sense what **they** need, instead. So you develop great listening skills. And then you shape your language and mold your actions to meet those needs because in doing so, everyone is made more whole. By the way, parents do this all the time with their children. Good moms almost automatically know when their children aren't feeling well or when something is bothering them. And instead of

engaging in confrontation, such moms slowly draw it out of their kids to help them cope and feel better. Why? Because Christ's love directs and moves us.

St. Paul once said that we are to be: "All things to all men" in order to win a few for the Lord. Break that down to its component parts and what he's really saying is that we all need to be empathetic. Are you? Do you even want to be? If not, why not?

I suppose there are characteristics of empathy. One is being a keen observer of others.—Listen carefully to their words and let them speak. Don't always try to bulldoze your way through a conversation and make it all about you. People generally like to talk about themselves. So, let them! It won't hurt to submerge your ego for a little while. Second, engage in interaction and don't make everything one-sided. (Our ego takes a hit here, as well.) For example, if you want to get to know children better and what they are really like, don't just sit back and tell them this or that. No, get down on the floor with them and play with them! Build blocks into houses or Legos into cars. Make paper airplanes and have contests in how far they fly. Giggle together. People of all ages open up when they are relaxed.

One of the truly awful expressions in life is: "I know how you feel." It's a lie. No one knows exactly how another feels at any given point in time. That expression is usually filler language used because we don't know what else to say in an uncomfortable moment. That being said, you do know similar situations because you probably went through them personally. So, you **can** relate. This is being empathetic. Drug abuse support networks work because everyone in them has walked that path. Cancer survivors can freely discuss their fears with other cancer survivors or patients and give comfort. Empathy is based on finding common ground and being willing to share that commonality.

Ultimately, we're all sinners. That's the commonality every human possesses. We all have strengths and weaknesses, hopes, dreams and fears. Being an empath is about using your background and life experiences to chip away at the veneer all people employ to hide what's really afflicting them at a given point in time. Empathy isn't put off by defensive words or a brusque demeanor. It lovingly looks beyond those externals and seeks to find what's really inside. And once you get a feel for that "something inside" it also fashions a game plan to calm their troubled soul.

The Christian life of sanctification, or holy living, is really about being empathic in all we think, say, and do. It is living for God and others, not merely for ourselves. Being empathetic is therefore summarized by Christ's definition of the 10 commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself." Yes, we "do unto others" not because they "do unto us" but because God's Son already has.....