

Empathy > Sympathy

There are perhaps no two emotions more closely related and yet distinct as sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is the acknowledgement of a person's hardships and is accompanied by the desire to provide that person certain comfort. Empathy, however, takes this one step further in understanding and relating to such a person's particular situation.

During times of struggle, we all search for something more than sympathy. We do not want a friend to simply pity us. Rather, we want someone who has been in our own shoes, been through a similar trial and knows how we feel.

I believe in a God who does not merely pity; he empathizes. Jesus is the God who created the world and yet humbled himself by becoming man in order to suffer death on the cross and forgive sins. Because He became flesh, Jesus understands the deep problems that exist in our world. Even though He lived during the first century, the problems he faced are not so different than those we experience today. During his life, Jesus encountered extreme poverty, political corruption, sexual depravity, social and racial discrimination, and hypocrites. The fact that Jesus walked among us and experienced this brokenness allows Him to relate to us on a personal level.

There is no better story in the Bible that reveals this attribute than the raising of Lazarus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters a community that is mourning the death of Lazarus. At the sight of their weeping, he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:34). The original Greek translation suggests that Jesus was moved by their grief to the point of anger due to the suffering, pain, and even death that exists in the world.

As the story continues, Jesus asks to see the tomb where the body lay. Then comes one of the shortest and most powerful verses in the Bible: *Jesus wept* (John 11:35). Knowing he would resurrect him, Jesus did not just weep for Lazarus' sake. Instead, Jesus could not help but weep when confronted with the sobbing of the mourners around him. He understood their deep emotions and expressed his empathy through tears.

That Jesus wept shows that He is not one who merely sympathizes. He does not just feel sorry for us. Rather, Jesus empathizes. He suffers as we suffer and feels the same pain – even to the point of anger - during times of tragedy. Jesus can empathize this way only because He became fully human and experienced the ultimate suffering on the cross.

It is this empathy that allows us to have an intimate relationship with Jesus. He is not some distant, mighty god who cannot relate to us lowly humans. Rather, He cares about our every situation, whether it is times of sufferings, times of stress, or even times of joy. During all times, Jesus is by our side and knows exactly what we are going through. Because He became flesh and suffered, Jesus does more than simply pity. He empathizes.

-Alison King '13