

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY | NOVEMBER 5, 2023

REVELATION 7:9-17 | PSALM 34:1-10, 22 | 1 JOHN 3:1-3 | MATTHEW 5:1-12

It's that time of year when the number of lawn signs around town reaches its peak. There are the campaign signs for mayors and school boards and town councils. There are also all the signs that contractors put up to announce their work. There are even a couple of graduation signs that people either are very proud of or just forgot about. There's also another kind of sign I find especially thought-provoking: the ones imploring drivers to slow down. The ones I find particularly interesting are the ones asking you to "Drive Like Your Kids Live Here."

I don't know how effective those signs are. (My hunch is not very.) But they attempt something unusual. Instead of appealing to your self-interest (If you speed, you may get pulled over, and given a ticket.) but to our capacity for empathy. Imagine you lived here. Now imagine you had kids that played outside. Now imagine what it would be like if you lived here, your kids played outside, and someone was speeding down your street.

Empathy, the ability to imagine ourselves in other people's situations, is an incredibly powerful cognitive ability.¹ It builds connections. It makes us more compassionate. It helps us see the world more fully.

But it also has its limits. Because it is so much easier to have empathy for people that I identify with. People who are like me in some meaningful way. Maybe we speak the same language. Maybe we're the same age. Maybe we practice the same faith. Or in the case of this sign, maybe we both have kids who play outside and get frustrated when people drive down our street too fast.

But if the primary way I develop empathy is through my ability to identify with other people, my compassion is always going to be limited, and my moral vision is always going to be constrained. It isn't difficult to find examples of this in our public life right now.

Consider the news correspondent who, at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, lamented that Kiev was "a relatively civilized, relatively European [city]... where you wouldn't expect that or hope that it's going to happen" because it "isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan."² Displaced families in Iraq are normal. Displaced families in Ukraine are a tragedy. The reason this reporter was so bothered by the families in Ukraine was not that their suffering was worse than that of families in Iraq, only that it was easy for him to identify with them.

Closer to home, consider the congressman who announced last week that he had had a change of heart and would start voting to restrict the sale of assault weapons. When there were mass shootings this year in California, Texas, Utah, Tennessee, or Oklahoma, he saw no reason to do anything. But after the shooting in Lewiston, Maine last week, suddenly he changed his mind. The reason he was so bothered by the shooting in Lewiston was not that the victims' suffering was meaningfully worse than those in California or Texas. It was because Lewiston is his hometown. And it was easy for him to identify with the victims.

To have empathy for others is admirable, of course. But it's troubling that it seems that our primary way to develop that capacity is for problems to affect people who look like us or talk like us or agree with us or live near us. In short, people that we identify with. We might eventually solve our problems this way, but if the primary way we experience the world's burdens is for them to affect people that we identify with, it's going to take an awful long time, and there's going to be an awful lot of misery along the way.

¹ From Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, Reprint edition (Ecco, 2016). Empathy is "the act of feeling what you believe other people feel—experiencing what they experience."

² "All due respect" is doing an awful lot of work here.

So instead of asking *Who are the people I identify with?*, we might be better served by asking *Who are the people Jesus identifies with?* He comes near not only to those who are like him—Jewish men from the countryside—but also those who differ from him in remarkable ways. The Syrophenician woman at the well. The tax collectors. The unclean and ostracized and cast out. Children and widows. Even his disciples were at best confused and at worst offended by the breadth of people Jesus identified himself with. And yet, Christ Jesus kept on creating new relationships that transcended inherited boundaries and norms. In fact, a better question might be *Who doesn't Jesus identify with?*

And here's the best part of this. When Jesus creates these relationships, he doesn't just keep them to himself. But he gives them to all of us. The word we use for this set of relationships is a "communion." A set of relationships and fellowship that we share together. When we confess in the Apostles' Creed that we believe in the "communion of saints," this is what we're talking about. That we are not a random assortment of individuals with our own private relationships with Jesus. But we have been knit together in this single tapestry of God's people.

This communion is Christ's gift to us. It means that we have people to help us grow in faith and love. We have people to support us in life's difficulties and celebrate life's joys with us. It also means that we are given the opportunity to support and help others grow into the pattern of Christ's life.

That would be enough to celebrate on its own. But today, I want to give you one more benefit of this communion. Our life in the communion of saints expands our moral imagination about who we are and whose we are. And whenever we try to restrict or contain our empathetic capacity, Christ keeps expanding it. Whenever we draw a line between us and them, people that we can identify with and people we don't need to bother with, Christ is always on the other side of that line.

After all, part of what is so remarkable about this communion is how expansive it is. The communion of saints transcends language. It transcends national borders. It transcends friendships and rivalries. And it even transcends death. It includes everyone who has been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. People that—through Christ—we can now identify with. Christ identifies with us so that we can identify with others.

That changes the way we live and move in the world. Because we have been brought into relationship with a whole new set of people. People who don't look like us. Or talk like us. Or pray like us. Or eat like us. "These are my people," Jesus says. The poor in spirit. The grieving. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. The persecuted. And because they are Jesus's people, they're our people, too.

How does 1 John put it? "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God." And in this communion of saints, that is what we—and they—are.

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