

This past week was the first day of school for many families. I always think of the Walmart commercial of the kids looking glum and scared while the parents are cruising down the aisles of the store picking out school supplies singing, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year!" It does feel like Christmas in August for many parents - 8 hours of freedom, 5 days a week. But for parents sending a child off to some kind of new experience, whether it is kindergarten or middle school or college, the first day of school is an emotional gut wrencher, particularly if your child is nervous or shy or worried.

Dave Barry wrote a classic piece 24 years ago on taking his son to Kindergarten. *We're taking our son, Robby, to his first day of kindergarten. He is being Very Brave. So are we. We're saying: "This is great!" And: "You're going to have a wonderful time!" Robby's thinking: This is it. The fun part of life is over now. We're thinking: Please, please, PLEASE let him not hate this and let the other kids be nice to him and let his teachers see, among all those little bobbing heads and skinny arms and Band-Aided legs, what a wonderful little boy this is. I think: If only they could put him to bed just one time, hear him talk to his stuffed dolphin, hear the dolphin answer back in a squeaky version of Robby's little voice.*

I give him his lunch money. I wish I could give him my muscles, to keep in the pocket of his little blue shorts in case a big kid tries to bully him. I wish I could give him my mind, so he'd understand why he has to go to school.

We're at his classroom. We're supposed to leave right away. They said hanging around only makes it worse. It couldn't be any worse. Robby is fighting panic, asking questions, stalling to keep us there, tears running quietly down his cheeks. "How many hours will it be?" he asks. Thousands, I think. Thousands and thousands, in classrooms, away from us, until you've learned to accept it, and you don't cry when we leave you, and when your dolphin never talks any more.

Ok, I'm ready for a good cry! Barry is usually really funny, but this poignant piece is deep calling out to deep. Any parent understands the desire to "give him my muscles", to take the place of your child who is suffering. And you don't have to be a parent, of course, to understand this kind of emotion. All you have to do is love somebody. Love feels what the other person feels. Love suffers if the other person suffers.

This is empathetic love, translated from Freud's term "Einfühlung"; it's the concrete representation of another person's mental state and accompanying emotions. It's the kind of love that we read about in our Hebrews passage today. *"Let mutual love continue. Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured."* The writer of Hebrews is speaking specifically about fellow believers – fellow church members here. Christians were tortured and thrown into prison for believing that Jesus was Lord.

But this kind of empathetic love knows no creedal boundaries. To identify with a little boy left alone in a kindergarten class is connect with your own feelings of abandonment or isolation. It is to be 5 years old again and lost in the department store. It is to be ignored and isolated and stranded. To wish to give the boy your muscles to ward off the bullies is deep calling out to deep. And it is the stuff of love, the mutual love which remembers those are in prison as though you were in prison with them.

I think that this kind of love comes when deep calls out to deep; when something inside you really connects with something inside another. And usually that something comes from fear or pain or suffering or loneliness or emptiness. Those darker emotions create the deeper empathy.

In Lloyd Douglas' 1934 novel *Green Light*, the Dean of Trinity Cathedral is deep calling out to deep. People of all social stripes come to talk to Dean Harcourt in his study. He understands people – all people. Most people who come see him are not members of his Cathedral or professing Christians. People just know that they will be understood and helped by this man. Dean Harcourt crippled; *“it is very plainly written on the man's face that he has suffered.”* His listening is full of empathetic love. Everyone can love in this way because everyone has suffered.

You may not have been in prison, but you can remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison because you know what it feels like on the primal level to be constricted, shut off, shut out.

The writer David Foster Wallace speaks from deep to deep because he suffered. In an interview shortly before he died, he said, *“Fear is (our) basic condition.”* He said that our fear comes from *“the dawning realization that nothing's enough.. no pleasure is enough, that no achievement is enough. That there's a kind of queer dissatisfaction or emptiness at the core of the self that is unassuageable by outside stuff.”*

Here I think Wallace puts his finger on a universal itch – the hole in the soul that cannot be filled but by God. Then he was asked if that fear stemming from emptiness could be assuageable by any means. *“I think its probably assuageable by internal means....something to do with....lovin' yourself. If you can think of times in your life that you've treated people with extraordinary decency and love, and pure uninterested concern, just because they were valuable as human beings. To treat ourselves the way we would treat a really good, precious friend. Or a tiny child of ours that we absolutely loved more than life itself.”* Like Robby going off to Kindergarten without his dolphin.

What Wallace, not a professing Christian, is saying is empathetic love is the way out of fear. Loving your neighbor as yourself, although he reverses the order. He is saying what the Bible says, *“Perfect love casts out fear.”* (1 John 4:18)

This kind of mutual love is the opposite of the way of the world, the “grabbing hands that grab all they can, all for themselves, after all.” (Depeche Mode) Though this love knows no creedal boundaries, it does come through one source – the God who has

revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. And the enormously comforting word from Hebrews is that Source of Love is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Yesterday, today and forever. Your past, your present, your future. In the words of St. Patrick's Breastplate: Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my left, Christ on my right, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise. Jesus' love in your life is the constant: He is the same yesterday, today and forever. From the depths of time, He is deep calling out to deep with empathetic love.

The truth is that Jesus Christ takes empathy to a deeper place. He does more than empathize with you, although just like Dean Harcourt, sufferers flee to Him because He has suffered. He actually takes your place; He does what love longs to do. I can't tell you how many times I've heard during a hospital visit, a mother saying, "How I wish it were me suffering and not my daughter." This is exactly what Jesus does for us: He dies for us, He takes our place, His deep and suffering love calling out to our deep emptiness and need.

His deep calling out to deep happened on a yesterday on a hill outside of Jerusalem. It resonates today with everyone who suffers in any way. It will stand like a clarion call to sinners forever, until every tear is wiped away from every eye, when the thousands and thousands of hours of hurt and loneliness are transformed into a never-ending banquet, when you will never be left alone and you will always be in the grip of your Father's hand. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

I'll close with a story of His empathetic love that unites the yesterday and the today, and give hope for the forever. Last Sunday I included a story about how 15 or so years ago I refused to do the wedding of a parishioner at Christ Church. I did not really understand the gospel and I used religion against this couple. Now I am embarrassed and saddened by what I did on that yesterday years ago.

In a sweet irony, I preached that sermon wearing the stole of the older minister who presided over their wedding with the grace of God. He died on a yesterday and his widow gave me his stoles. Today I wear his stole and preach the grace of God.

On Monday I sent the sermon and a letter of apology to this family, who had left Christ Church but still live in Charlottesville. When the parents got the letter, the father came immediately to me office to see me, and the mother wrote a long letter to me, saying they "were both moved by the sermon and accept your apology unconditionally." They acknowledged that it was a very difficult time for them, but they offered me the empathetic and unconditional love of Christ; forgiving the yesterday, making peace in the today, and offering hope for the forever.

I, for one, am grateful that Jesus Christ, the Source of Love, is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.

