

**SERMON – 7/2/21**  
**'Stepping into others' Shoes'**

Romans 12:9-16

“Be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep.”  
(Romans 12:15)

I want to begin this morning by raising three questions. To start with, I would like it if each of us could ask these questions of ourselves, and by the time we have finished we might be feeling our way towards some answers. But I am also very keen that we consider how other people might answer and that by the time we have finished we might be bold enough actually to *ask* other people these questions, so that we might deepen our conversations with one another within the church family and reach out to those who are not currently connected with the church.

You're wondering what the questions are, aren't you? Well, let's dive in. Question number one: Who am I? I ask it of myself, and I ask it of you this morning: Who are you? What is it that makes you, you? Are you comfortable in your own skin or do you sometimes struggle with your identity?

Question number two is this: Where do I fit in? I ask it of myself and again I also ask it of you: Where do you fit in? Who do you connect with and how are your relationships with family members, with people in a social circle or at work or in a group you belong to, and very specifically where do you fit in as part of church? Do you feel isolated or do you feel connected, or does it vary?

And here is question number three: What difference do I make? Once more I ask it of myself and I ask it of you: What difference do you make? Do you have a sense that you have a role in life and tasks to fulfil that are unique to you, or do you sometimes feel like a spare part whose contribution isn't valued? What difference do you make in the church family?

OK, I hope that you perhaps have some idea of the answers to those questions as they relate to you, your sense of self, your interconnectedness with others and your purpose in life, but what I would like you to do today is to try and put yourself in someone else's shoes and to think yourself into

someone else's circumstances, because this morning's theme in our Growing Young series is Empathy.

Think of someone very different from you in the congregation. If you are older, look at church life from the perspective of a younger person. If you are young, ponder what it must be like if you are older. If you are a newcomer, try and put yourself in the position of someone who has been here all their life. And vice versa. If you are female, consider how church might be different for you if you were male. And vice versa. If you are on your own and struggling with lock-down, ponder what it is like to be cooped up in a house with others, and if you think it's hard sharing a house with others, have you ever wondered how hard it might be to be on your own? Of course, it's not at all easy actually to put yourself in someone else's shoes (as Ali helpfully showed us earlier with the example of Kirsty trying on her uncle's boots) and we need to be very careful not to make false assumptions and jump to the wrong conclusions.

As part of the Growing Young research project, 500 young people were asked what they would like more of in their church youth group. Perhaps you might think that young folk would be clamouring for more games nights – actually that came in last place. What came top of the list was time to have deep conversations, closely followed by opportunities to get out and serve others. But nobody had actually asked *them* what was important to them. And perhaps nobody has ever asked *you* what would be most helpful to you in the life of the church. Or those who have drifted away from the church over the years because it wasn't scratching where they were itching. I think we have to have a conversation.

Our Bible reading this morning takes us to that part of Paul's letter to the Romans where he turns from the proclamation of the Gospel message to the outworking of faith in daily life. In the opening verses of chapter 12, the apostle calls us not to conform to the world's standards but to let God transform us by a complete change of our minds. Our human instinct is to think that we know best not just what is good for us ourselves but also what is good for other people. But Christ's way prompts us to consider others before ourselves. Jesus gave Himself up for us in the most perfect example of empathy there could ever be – He put Himself in our shoes, and not just in our shoes, but in our skin and bone.

We could have sung words from the Christmas carol, Once in royal David's city, this morning:

“For He is our childhood's pattern: day by day like us He grew,  
He was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us He knew;  
and He feels for all our sadness, and He shares in all our gladness.”

Isn't that what the apostle Paul says to us here? “Be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep.” Feel for others' sadness, share in others' gladness, step into others' shoes. How can we do that unless we really get to know them. That is what this morning's passage calls us to in a variety of different ways: “Love must be completely sincere.” (v.9) It can't just be pulled off the shelf or ordered online, it has to be worked out in real situations. “Love one another warmly as Christian brothers and sisters.” (v.10) This is family and while we don't need to live in each others' pockets we do need to go deeper than we might with a passer-by. “Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians and open your homes to strangers,” says the apostle. (v.13) Now that takes church life beyond one hour a week, doesn't it. “Have the same concern for everyone, do not be proud but accept humble duties, do not think of yourselves as wise.” (v.16) I don't need to labour the point – it's challenging enough straight from the page.

But here's what it might mean for us in Kinross Parish Church. If we are to be the kind of church that is growing young and being revitalised, then we each have a role to play, each one of us going deeper with God until we are assured by grace of who God wants us to be and allow the Holy Spirit to produce fruit in us and through us in love for our fellow believers and in service to the wider world. Then, in Christ we will know with the certainty of faith who we are and where we fit and what difference we can make. But we will also be prompted to be more and more connected with our fellow members, not in holy huddles of our own making, reinforcing our own preconceptions and being conformed to the way of the world by talking only with those who share similar views or who have a similar life experience, but with people of different generations and different backgrounds, getting to know who they are and what makes them tick, what makes them happy (so that we can be happy for them and with them) and what makes them sad (so that we can be sad and weep with them).

Who am I? And who is my neighbour? Where do I fit? And where does my sister fit? What difference do I make? And what difference does my brother make? We all make assumptions about what life is like for other people, even within the church family, and we all judge others for the choices they make in life or the demands they make about how they would like things to be without necessarily understanding where they are coming from. Isn't it time we listened to one another rather than expecting them to listen to us?

Let me urge you to reach out to someone in the congregation this week and put yourself in their shoes by finding out what challenges they are dealing with in life at the moment. I know it's more difficult than it would be if we were all in the same building and can chat over coffee after the service, but then again maybe it's actually easier to make the first move by picking up the phone or sending a message. If you are younger, find out about someone older. If you are older, get to know someone younger. Ask a friend to introduce you to someone new, or get in touch with me and I'll put you in touch with someone in the congregation that you may not know.

“Be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep.” We're all different and we're all in different places; but we are each a dearly loved child of God, each with a place and a purpose in God's plans. Let's find out this week how we fit together. Let's talk.