

TOGETHER AT THE TABLE

*Diversity without Division
in The United Methodist Church*

KAREN P. OLIVETO

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer



WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. The Fractured Family Table	13
2. Exercising Empathy	45
3. Leaning into Ambiguity	73
4. Diversity Is a Sign of Divinity	95
5. Unity Is Not Uniformity	121
6. We Eat with People We Love	147
Notes	175

Chapter 2

EXERCISING EMPATHY

The path from the Powell Street Station to the corner of Taylor and Ellis in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, where Glide Memorial UMC stands, is a study in the disparity of wealth that exists in the United States. At Powell Street, tourists from around the world mingle with techies clutching the latest smart phone. Panhandlers wait with empty cups, asking for spare change. Most are ignored as pedestrians avert their eyes and walk quickly by.

Just a few blocks over, people stand in queues at Glide and St. Anthony's, waiting for a meal, or lie on the street, strung out on drugs. Some have created mini-camps, surrounded by all their possessions. Others just take their spot on an old piece of cardboard. Folks gather under street lamps, as money or the promise of sex is offered in exchange for drugs.

Most tour guides encourage sidestepping the Tenderloin, or the TL as it is known. As a pastor in the TL, I considered these forgotten and overlooked ones my congregation. As I walked through the neighborhood, people would greet me: "Hey, Rev!" "Hi, Momma Glide!" "See you Sunday, Pastor Karen!" I listened to the trials and hard times of my neighbors and celebrated their joys and milestones.

Thinking about those two worlds—Powell Street and the TL—I am struck by how I saw some of the best

of humanity in what is considered one of the worst neighborhoods. Glide served food three times a day, 364 days a year (every day but New Year's Day), providing more than 800,000 meals. No matter what shape one was in—sick or stoned—or what one had done, there was a community ready to welcome you and food waiting for you. Even if it was past serving hours, bag lunches were kept at the front desk for anyone who asked for one.

One day, someone came to the front desk, asked for one of the bag lunches, and was informed that we had given out the last one. The person walked outside and began a loud, mournful wail. One person, sitting with his back against the wall of the church called out, "Hey, man! What's going on?" "I'm hungry. HUNGRY! And so tired. I need food" was the reply, given between sobs. The cries were from one who had reached the end of his rope, full of despair. "Hey now. C'mere. Look what I got." The man on the ground reached into his bag lunch and pulled out the sandwich. "It's not much, but I'll give you half."

The sobs quieted as the sandwich exchanged hands. The person slid down the wall and the two began to talk over their shared meal. I knew that if the scene had been closer to Powell Street, the hungry person would have stayed hungry. But one person felt the hunger pangs of another, and instead of turning away and hiding his own stash of food, he was moved to literally break bread with the hungry stranger.

Empathy is the ability to enter into the joys, pains, and experiences of another. Two people, sitting on a city sidewalk, one sharing a bag lunch with another, shows the power of empathy to fill hungry lives. Empathy creates community. It enables us to connect deeply with those who are different from us. Without empathy, differences and disagreements will surely lead to dismissiveness and division.

I believe that we are currently facing an empathy deficit in this country and, unfortunately, also in the church.

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the other being's frame of reference, i.e., the capacity to place oneself in another's position. Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another and feeling with the heart of another.¹

However, while the global village is shrinking through social media and travel, there is a new provincialism emerging, resulting in the inability to understand another's experience and therefore give it validity. As a result, injustice increases and communication breaks down.

EMPATHY BEYOND ONE'S RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

One look at our city streets and how many cities have criminalized homelessness is an example of an empathy deficit. As someone who has worked with the homeless community, I learned that homelessness becomes a full-time job when you need to find a safe place to sleep, find food, find a place to go to the bathroom, brush your teeth, and attend to other personal hygiene matters. If we had empathy for those who were homeless, we would both seek to fix the systems that keep people in poverty and on the streets as well as find ways to make living on the streets more humane.

It is not unusual for Glide to have a fully packed church for its worship Celebrations, with people even sitting on windowsills and on the steps leading up to the chancel area. With so many people, particularly with many who are either high or mentally ill, there is always constant motion

and a baseline noise level of people moving and muttering. I quickly became accustomed to this low hum of humanity around me as I preached. One day, I was preaching about the persistent widow who kept knocking on the judge's door seeking justice. I was mid-sermon and was only dimly aware that the hum was a bit louder and more agitated than usual. Cecil asked me to stop preaching for a moment. It was then that I realized there was a woman in the second pew in obvious distress. She was rocking back and forth and talking to herself. She began to get louder and louder and I could finally make out her words.

"F@#k this sh*t. F@#k this sh*t. F@#k this sh*t," she kept saying, over and over again. As I looked more closely at her, I realized she was one of the homeless folks Glide serves and invites into our community. "F@#k this sh*t."

I watched as Cecil made his way down to the second pew and sat himself down next to her. "F@#k this sh*t. No one knows how hard it is. No one! Not to be able to take a piss. Not to be able to clean myself up. Do any of the folks in this place know how hard it is when you are living in the streets?" She then began her mantra again: "F@#k this sh*t. F@#k this sh*t. F@#k this sh*t."

Cecil began to stroke her arm and then spoke to her, "We love you. We love you. We love you."

Back and forth, as two competing counterpoints, Cecil and the woman continued to speak: "F@#k this sh*t." "We love you." "F@#k this sh*t." "We love you." "F@#k this sh*t." "We love you." Slowly, Cecil's message of unconditional love began to reach her. Her words softened. She then began to cry as Cecil held her. After a few minutes, Cecil looked her in the eye for the longest time and said one more time, "We love you." The woman took

a deep breath, exhaled, and sank into her pew peacefully. Cecil returned to his seat and motioned for me to continue my sermon.

The gospel came alive for us that morning as the woman in the second pew became the widow knocking at the door, persistent, relentless in seeking to be seen, heard, and responded to. We all *felt* her distress. We all *experienced* her struggle for dignity on the streets. We *suffered* with her. Her outburst wasn't an embarrassment. It wasn't something to be covered up or dealt with so that we could continue with the order of service. It was precisely why we gather: to know and be known by the God who loves us and the people who are our family, who bear witness to our struggles and tell us we are loved through it all.

But this is not the norm for most North American churches. The woman's expression of despair is not considered acceptable behavior in most public settings. People in physical, emotional, or spiritual distress are overlooked, unseen, and dismissed in society and politely escorted down the aisle and out the door of most churches. Our lack of empathy for another's lived reality breaks down human community. It limits our ability to engage one another in life-affirming ways that challenge and change unjust structures.

At Bethany United Methodist Church, where I served for twelve years, a similar scene had taken place, but with a much different outcome. Diana was a special needs child, adopted by Cheryl, a single mom. The church became the village that helped Cheryl raise Diana and two other children. We grew accustomed to Diana's questions that she'd ask during what many would consider inappropriate times. When she'd wander around the sanctuary, folks would watch her to make sure she was okay. Often,

she would come up to the front of the sanctuary while I was preaching, and on more than one occasion I would pick her up and preach with her in my arms.

One Sunday, Diana was more agitated than normal. She spoke even more loudly and emphatically and would rarely stay seated. Finally, a visitor blurted, “Someone needs to do something about that child. She should be removed from the sanctuary.”

You could have heard a pin drop after she spoke. I turned to the woman and said, “The only thing we will do with that child is continue to love her, so she will always know she is a child of God. We hope you will help us with that task.” The woman got up from her seat and walked out the door. This was not our intent. Community can be messy, especially when people are invited to bring all of who they are to it.

Another example of a lack of empathy is shown when white, presumably heterosexual men decide they know what is best for women’s health care and reproductive rights. Pictures of Republican politicians creating laws that will impact women’s lives, with no women at the table, show what can happen when we fail to have empathy—we create policy that affects the lives of others with no input or guidance from the very people whose lives will be impacted.

In late 2017, the #MeToo movement emerged in the United States. Beginning with those in the entertainment industry, women began to name not only the sexual harassment and assault they had experienced, but also the names of their abusers. More and more women began to share their stories, as social media was filled with #MeToo testimonies. From politicians to movie directors, men began to be held accountable for their abusive actions toward women. Some of the abusers were penitent. Others couldn’t understand

what the fuss was about. Still others wondered, “If these acts really happened, why did it take these women so long to say something?”

A lack of empathy enables one to treat another as an object, meant for one’s own pleasure or power. Sexual harassment/abuse fails to understand the impact one’s behavior has on the one being abused. It has no concept of how the behavior shames and harms. It can take years for an abused one to finally name the behavior. Someone who asks why it took so long for the abuse to be named fails to have empathy for the one who was harmed, to note the visible and invisible scars that create a deafening silence.

Perhaps more than any issue, race relations in the United States provides evidence of the empathy deficit we face. Whites have difficulty seeing beyond the privilege their race affords to seeing those whose experience is much different. Racial discrimination is often discounted or denied. There is an inability or lack of will to open oneself up to the real lived experience of another.

This was one of my deepest lessons as pastor of Glide. As a white woman, I had to confront my privilege, and the fact that my walk in the world is much easier because of my race than the walk of persons of color. Every day, I had to confess my racism. Racism is so deeply embedded in our culture and entangles all of us in its web of inequity. Racism isn’t an inconvenient social construct. It is a deadly way to control others.

Too many of us who live comfortably and even blindly with the privilege that comes from our white skin want to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that we live in a post-racial society. When we hear our black and brown brothers and sisters tell of their racist treatment, we often interrupt and say, “It’s not really like that anymore.” Or, “You should see what happened to me.”

I have to consciously reject my racism every day, and the main way I do so is through the power of empathy, listening deeply to how those of color have a much different experience of the world than I do. I must understand that doors that open up automatically for me because of my whiteness open with difficulty—if at all—for persons of color. My race affords me places of safety not granted to those of other races. I am not frightened of police officers. I don't worry that by putting on a hoodie, I will be perceived as dangerous. I have never given my nieces and nephews "the talk" about how they should behave if ever stopped by a police officer. I have never been followed in a store by the owner because he automatically assumes that I am a suspect for shoplifting simply because of the color of my skin. I have never had to look very far—in books, movies, television, or church meetings—to see people who look like me. In white America, the color of my skin grants me power and privilege.

I will never forget the day I realized that my walk in the world was different from that of my friends of color. In college, one of my professors (yes, one) was black. Every day he came to class dressed so dapper. In an era when jeans and flannel shirts were the rule, he stood out by his three-piece suits and hat, even though he was only about five years older than the students he taught. There was a reason why he dressed so fine. It was a way to show respectability in a culture that held black men with suspicion. He told us about how not once, not twice, but nearly every time he drove through the town to get to work, he would be pulled over by police. This wasn't Birmingham in the 1950s—it was New Jersey in the 1970s. Whether he was with a colleague or his children, he would suffer the indignity of the police asking him to step out of the car for questioning. His crime? Guilty of driving while black.

This busted open my world. I didn't question the truth of his experience. I didn't try to dismiss it. Instead, it forced me to see my own privilege and began my commitment to be an ally in dismantling racism. From Birmingham of the 1950s to New Jersey in the 1970s to San Francisco in the 2010s, there is still much work to do.

One day, I was nearly to the door of Glide when a taxi pulled out and Joyce Hayes fell into my arms sobbing. Joyce was the matriarch of the church. I asked what was wrong, and she said she had been standing at the curb at the Ferry Building for forty-five minutes, trying to hail a cab. Literally hundreds of taxis passed her by without stopping. Finally, a white man noticed what was going on and asked if he could help. He raised his hand and immediately a cab stopped. The stranger had empathy for an elderly black woman who was simply trying to hail a cab. That empathy propelled him to take action, to stand with the woman and use his own privilege to assist her.

Empathy between oppressed groups is often in short supply, as we each strive for our own group's rights and opportunities. I saw this tendency in action when our friends Gail and Donna came to visit us in San Francisco. Gail, an African American, wanted to get a T-shirt from an LGBTQ organization. When we went into the store, Gail went straight to the back of the store, where the T-shirts were. The rest of us—all white—stayed in front. Immediately, one of the cashiers went to the back. I assumed he was going to help my friend find the sort of shirt she was looking for, so I went back to help her look as well. Instead of helping Gail, however, he had profiled her and was trying to inconspicuously follow her, to make sure she wasn't going to steal something.

When we left the store, she was livid at her treatment. Being a community leader in San Francisco and in the LGBTQ community, I wrote to the organization's executive director, explaining what my friend experienced and I witnessed, and suggesting that the organization bring in someone to train their workers on cross-cultural competency and intersectionality. Instead of an apology, the executive director replied, "There's no way this could have happened in our store!"

As the Rev. Dr. Dottie Escobedo-Frank implored when the Western Jurisdiction elected me, a lesbian, instead of her, a Latina, we must not forget what it feels like to be excluded, but rather let our experience with exclusion grow our empathy for others on the margins. When we refuse to hear the truth of the lived experiences of others, we become oppressors, exercising power over others. We see it as a way to keep ourselves "safe." At least that's what we convince ourselves we are doing.

It was early in my ministry at Glide that I had an epiphany of my own lack of empathy, which was limiting my understanding of those whose lives were so different from my own. As we studied the demographics of Glide's neighborhood, we discovered that the largest concentration of the formerly incarcerated in San Francisco was located within a two-block radius of Glide. We discussed what we should do in response. Then we realized we were asking the wrong question. We began to ask, What can those who are formerly incarcerated teach us of their lives and tell us how we can be in partnership with them to assist them in their transition to life "on the outside"?

We passed out flyers around the neighborhood, inviting folks to come to a free dinner and open mic night. Glide's Freedom Hall was packed with people. One by one,

guests moved to the microphone and shared the reality of their lives. In the telling alone, empowerment was found. It was such a powerful night, we decided to host a “Speak Out” every week.

Each Wednesday, an amazing collection of humanity gathered: homeless and housed, addicts and those in recovery, sex workers and Glide staff, congregants and tourists came together to tell the truth of their lives. One evening, a young man wove his way to the microphone and swayed in silence in front of us. His rotting teeth exposed the depth of his addiction. His glassy eyes and twitching body gave away the fact that he was quite high. The usual noise around the room settled the longer he stood in silence at the microphone. When the room was totally quiet and all eyes were on him, he looked at us and said, “Can I trust you with my dignity?”

Those words have been seared into my soul. This really is the heart of it all. Can others trust me with their dignity? Can I see beyond my own reality and truth and embrace the fact that the reality and truth of others doesn’t discount my own? It does, however, inform my life and invites me to live in ways that are responsive to the pains and sufferings of others.

This insight has been helpful as I navigate difficult conversations with those angry at my election. My task is not to defend or debate. My task is to listen. How has my ministry adversely impacted the faith of others? How can I respond in ways that build relationship, not further alienate and separate? What is it about my election that has aroused such anger?

STAYING UNDEFENDED AND GENEROUSLY LOVING

As I engage with those unhappy with my election, I am always surprised at not just the hurtful ways they feel they

can address me, but their unwillingness to acknowledge my personal faith journey. I discussed this with my spiritual director, the Rev. Debra Peevey. Debra was the first and only out LGBTQ pastor in her denomination for nearly a decade. She shared with me a conversation she had with a pastor who had had a conversion experience from condemning LGBTQ persons to becoming an ally. She asked him, “What did you think of us as you were saying those hateful things about us and our lives? Did you ever think of how you were harming us?” He responded, “To tell you the truth, I never once considered your humanity.”

I have experienced this in my role as bishop. As part of my commitment to be in ministry with all people, as well as to get to know my episcopal area, I asked my district superintendents to take me on a tour of our area’s churches so I could meet people and learn of their ministries. I never knew how I would be received by these communities. Would people welcome me as their bishop, or would they be hostile? As we pulled into the parking lot of each church, I prayed this prayer: “Keep me undefended, O God, and help me be generously loving in all I say and do.” Almost always, I was received warmly by the churches. As I stepped in one church, however, I realized I was facing a hostile crowd.

As I entered the room, sixty people were in neat rows facing away from the door. Everyone had a Bible, pad of paper, and pen on their lap. No one smiled. No one acknowledged me. The pastor introduced the Rev. Margaret Gillikin, the district superintendent, and me. Margaret gave the usual introduction, which included a little about my background and the purpose of our visit. Then I stood before the crowd to speak. There were two questions I asked every church: “How are you making disciples of

Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?”—which is based on the mission statement of The United Methodist Church—and “How can I as your bishop and the staff of the annual conference serve you better to support you in your ministries?” Between the two questions, I usually offered a small devotion.

I had barely stated the first question when people began interrupting me in angry tones, questioning me regarding my understanding of the Bible and the church. Every time I tried to respond, someone would cut me off, dismiss my answer, and ask another question. It was an aggressive, hostile interrogation, and my responses were clearly unacceptable.

I realized that we were not going to engage together in healthy dialogue, so I said, “It’s time for Margaret and me to head to the next church. Let’s pray together first.” As I bowed my head, I heard chairs being shoved aside as voices clamored, “We will *not* pray with you.” “No *way*.” “You can pray on your own.” When I finished my prayer, a room that once held sixty people now held ten.

How would this encounter have been different if empathy had guided our interaction with one another? Empathy causes our defenses to come down and our guardedness to yield to generosity and honest curiosity. It encourages an inquiry that invites further discussion and discovery through mutually respectful engagement. Instead, brokenness was furthered by an unwillingness to remain at the table together and be in prayer with and for one another.

Another experience where a lack of empathy was exposed was at a meeting of the Council of Bishops. During this twice-yearly meeting, United Methodist bishops from around the world gather to attend to the spiritual needs

and administrative oversight of the church. I was extremely nervous about attending my first council meeting, knowing that there were some bishops unhappy with my election. I was greatly relieved by the warm welcome of my new colleagues and enjoyed being a part of the council.

The second meeting of the council occurred following the April 2017 meeting of the denomination's Judicial Council, where the question of law regarding my election was considered. The council would rule on the question by the end of the week, when we bishops were gathering for our meeting in Dallas. The Judicial Council's ruling could abruptly change the course of my life: Would I still be a bishop? Would I still be assigned to the Mountain Sky Area? Would I still have an income and place to live? Robin and I lived into this uncertainty in the months prior to the decision by sinking into God's embrace and trusting that God had brought us this far and wouldn't abandon us.

When the Judicial Council ruled on the eve of the start of the Council of Bishops meeting, I was relieved that my consecration and assignment were still in place. However, their decision added new restrictions to LGBTQ people in ministry, and I was concerned about how this would impact my relationship with bishop colleagues.

At this meeting, all new bishops were going to be formally presented to the council, since both newly elected US and non-US bishops were now in place. Each new bishop would be receiving an official parchment, personalized with our deacon and elder ordination dates and the date of our episcopal consecration, along with the names of the bishops who participated in each event. At the beginning of our meeting, all the new bishops' parchments were laid out, so that all bishops could sign them. All bishops queued up and began to move from parchment to parchment in order to sign them, one after the other.

In the middle of our council meeting, members of the executive team called me aside. “We have noted what happened with your parchment and want to order a new one.” I had anticipated that some bishops would refrain from signing my parchment and attempted to shrug it off: “That’s okay. You don’t have to do that.” They responded, “We are troubled by how people defaced your parchment, and we want to correct this.”

Wait . . . defaced?

Sure enough: there, on the signatures section of the parchment, two bishops had realized they had accidentally signed my parchment as they were moving through the line and had gone back to cross their names out. One name was still plainly visible. The second name was painstakingly crossed out to ensure that it was illegible. Thirteen other bishops had not signed my parchment.

It is those two bishops who crossed out their names that I have reflected on the most. Did these two individuals stop and consider how their actions would affect me? Did they pause before scratching their names out, wondering how their etching would look on this official parchment, one that would hang in my office and eventually be sent to The United Methodist Archives? Did they ever stop to consider my feelings as they sought to erase the tacit approval their signature gave of my episcopacy? Where was their empathy toward a colleague they might have held reservations about but was nonetheless still a colleague? Debra’s conversation with her colleague helps me understand their actions: “I never once considered your humanity.”

But I, too, have to ask myself, “Where and when do I deny another’s humanity?” I know my election has caused some to question their faith, their reading of Scripture, their understanding of rules as well as the church. There

are times when I get weary and impatient of those who struggle with my election. When I feel these emotions rising up within me, I take it as a nudge from God, a reminder to exercise empathy, to feel their sense of loss and confusion, and to make that the starting point in my relationship with them.

The heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ reduces all the laws to two: to love God and love others. But without an integration of empathy and love, we continue to “other.” It is what fosters the saying “Hate the sin but love the sinner,” or, the ultimate in passive-aggressive love, “Bless your heart.”

We need a spirituality that increases our capacity for empathy. We need to foster this in every faith community, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our families. We need to learn spiritual practices and spiritual disciplines that open us to the depth of empathy that connects us to the experiences faced by others in the human family.

Empathy isn't an easy thing to master. Like any muscle, it requires practice and constant exercising. Without doing so, empathy atrophies. We measure the rest of the world, including the experiences of others, against our own life experiences. We can grow our capacity for empathy by being curious about others and allowing their lives to speak instead of viewing them through the lens of our own life.

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer

