I don’t feel your pain

by M. Craig Barnes in the July 23, 2014 issue

Han Lee was one of those seminarians whom our faculty adores. He worked hard, asked great questions, and listened intently. When my family was moving into the president’s house he asked if he could help me unpack my books. After he arrived we immediately launched into a fascinating conversation about calling and never made it through the first box of books. Over the past year I was thrilled to watch him claim his call to serve as a Korean-American pastor.

When Han was halfway through his last semester of seminary, his father died. As the oldest son, the expectation was that he would immediately drop out of school, take over the family business, and care for his mother. He was six weeks away from being ordained as a pastor. Instead he would now manage a struggling bar that was open most of the night. He stopped by my office on the way out of school to ask for help.

We were able to hold his place at the seminary, use a trustee’s referrals to provide legal and financial advising, and listen with broken hearts. But what none of us could do was say, “I know how you feel.” Empathy would have only been an impediment to Han’s path ahead.

We are told, as far back as Introduction to Psychology in college, that empathy is great, and sympathy is bad. In *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, rabbi and psychotherapist Edwin Friedman challenges this belief.

Empathy is the vicarious experience of someone else's feelings. Friedman's thesis is that this is impossible because we can only feel our own feelings. So when we try to get inside someone else under the guise of being empathetic, we are actually just violating boundaries to find more of ourselves. We can feel burdened by the pathos of others, but that is sympathy. We can suffer alongside others, which is compassion.

The word *empathy* is relatively new, says Friedman. It was first used in 1922 as a translation of the German *Einfühlung*, which art critics used to describe a process of projecting oneself into the art in order to enhance appreciation of it. But the word was so obscure that it still didn't enter into common parlance until after World War II, when therapists began to apply it to human relationships. Projecting oneself inside the skin of another, goes the analogy, enables us to understand that person fully.

Did we suddenly become more sensitive in the last century, or does the popularity of the concept suggest something else? Empathy made it big in an era that some sociologists called the "me generation," known for its preoccupation with finding yourself and demanding the freedom to "do your own thing." By discovering my feelings inside you, even you are about me.

I'm certain that Friedman was correct at least about this. In more than 30 years of pastoral ministry I was never sure I understood the complexities of someone's feelings. I may have lost a loved one to death, but I didn't lose Gordon, who spent 60 years married to Judith. How dare I attempt to invade Judith's most intimate chamber of grief? Isn't it more helpful to hold her trembling hand, pray for her, and listen to her stories as my eyes well up with tears? But this is the important part—the tears are coming from someplace in me, not from her. I'm not offended if you call that sympathy or compassion.

If there is an authentically empathetic ministry in our lives, it can come only from the Holy Spirit. Mortals live within boundaries. Only the Spirit feels our deep groaning and then binds us more deeply into the life of Jesus Christ, who leads us into holy responses to our pain. This is a holy mystery that a pastor, counselor, or friend can never offer.

When I meet with a group of students who are minorities and hear their stories about how severe racism has been for them, I am dismayed and overwhelmed. When I talk with a blind student, I am amazed by her courage. When I listen to a young man who has to drop out to take care of his mother, I cannot stop weeping. But the last thing any of them wants to hear is, “I feel your pain.” They know it’s impossible.

Even if it were possible, it would rob these students of the dignity of taking responsibility for their lives, because once the empathetic listener is inside someone’s soul all the feelings are *shared*. And it’s a small step from that to saying the feelings are owned. Then personal responsibility is impossible. To the best of my knowledge, Martin Luther King Jr. never had an “I feel your pain” speech. Instead he mobilized the nation to take responsibility for its injustice. He pressed the African American’s responsibility to march for justice and the responsibility of the majority culture to repent.

I care a great deal about Han Lee and will stay in close touch with him. But part of my pastoral care is honoring the holy place inside him where only the Spirit can transform his complex feelings into an invitation to reclaim his life.